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THE BALL ROSE AND FLEW DIRECTLY FOR THE BASKET.
Girls of Central High at Basketball *(Frontispiece)*—**Page 59**

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The Girls of Central High at Basketball

OR

The Great Gymnasium Mystery

BY

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THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH ON LAKE LUNA,
ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH AT BASKETBALL

CHAPTER I

HESTER IS MIFFED

THE referee's whistle sounded sharply, and the eighteen girls of Central High engaged in playing basketball, as well as an equal number strung along the side lines, stopped instantly and turned their eyes on Mrs. Case, the physical instructor.

"Hester Grimes! you are deliberately delaying the game. I have reprimanded you twice. The third time I will take you out of the team for the week——"

"I didn't, either!" cried the person addressed, a rather heavily built girl for her age, with a sturdy body and long arms—well developed in a muscular way, but without much grace. She had very high color, too, and at the present moment her natural ruddiness was heightened by anger.

"You are breaking another rule of the game by directly addressing the referee," said Mrs.

Case, grimly. "Are you ready to play, or shall I take you out of the game right now?"

The red-faced girl made no audible reply, and the teacher signalled for the ball to be put into play again. Three afternoons each week each girl of Central High, of Centerport, who was eligible for after-hour athletics, was exercised for from fifteen to thirty minutes at basketball. Thirty-six girls were on the ground at a time. Every five minutes the instructor blew her whistle, and the girls changed places. That is, the eighteen actually playing the game shifted with the eighteen who had been acting as umpires, judges, timekeepers, scorers, linesmen and coaches. This shifting occupied only a few seconds, and it put the entire thirty-six girls into the game, shift and shift about. It was in September, the beginning of the fall term, and Mrs. Case was giving much attention to the material for the inter-school games, to be held later in the year.

Hester Grimes had played the previous spring on the champion team, and held her place now at forward center. But although she had been two years at Central High, and was now a Junior, she had never learned the first and greatest truth that the physical instructor had tried to teach her girls:

"Keep your temper!"

Since spring several of the girls playing on the first team of Central High had left school, graduating as seniors. The work now was to whip this team into shape, and finally Mrs. Case and the girls themselves, voting upon the several names in their capacity as members of the Girls' Branch Athletic League, had settled upon the following roster of names and positions as the "make-up" of the best-playing basketball team of Central High:

Josephine Morse, goal-keeper
Evangeline Sitz, right forward
Dora Lockwood, left forward
Hester Grimes, forward center
Laura Belding, jumping center
Lily Pendleton, back center
Dorothy Lockwood, right guard
Nellie Agnew, left guard
Bobby Hargrew, goal guard

The basketball court of Central High was located in the new Girls' Athletic Field, not far from the school building itself, and overlooking beautiful Lake Luna and the boathouses and rowing course. At the opening of Central High this fall the new field and gymnasium had first come into use.

The athletic field, gymnasium and swimming pool were the finest in the State arranged for girls' athletics. They had been made possible by the generosity of one of the very wealthy men of Centerport, Colonel Richard Swayne, and his interest in the high school girls and their athletics had been engaged by one of the girls themselves, Laura Belding by name, but better known among her schoolfellows and friends as "Mother Wit."

The play went on again under the keen eye of the instructor. Mrs. Case believed most thoroughly in the efficiency of basketball for the development and training of girls; but she did not allow her charges to play the game without supervision. Lack of supervision by instructors is where the danger of basketball and kindred athletics lies.

The game is an excellent one from every point of view; yet within the last few years it has come into disfavor in some quarters, and many parents have forbidden their daughters to engage in it. Like bicycling in the past, and football with the boys, basketball has suffered "a black eye" because of the way it has been played, not because of the game itself.

But the Girls' Branch played the game under sound rules, and under the keen oversight of the

instructor engaged by the Board of Education of Centerport for that purpose. Basketball is the first, or one of the first vigorous team games to become popular among women and girls in this country, and under proper supervision will long remain a favorite pastime.

The rules under which the girls of Central High played the game were such as brought into basketball the largest number of players allowed. Whereas there were often in the games on Central High courts only right forward, left forward center, right guard and left guard, with possibly a jumping center—these games being engaged in by the girls for their own amusement —in the regular practice and when the representative team played the teams of other schools, the girls on the field numbered nine upon a side.

Thus conforming with the new rules, Mrs. Case, and the physical instructors of the other highs of Centerport and the neighboring cities, made the interest in basketball more general and enabled a greater number of ambitious girls to gain coveted positions on the first team.

Suddenly Mrs. Case's whistle stopped the play again. And as the bustle and activity subsided, two girls' voices rose above all.

"You just see! It's only Hester who gets scolded——"

"It's not so! If she'd play fair——"

"Miss Pendleton and Miss Agnew are discussing something of much importance—much more important than the game," said the referee, tartly.

"Well, she said——" began Nellie Agnew, who was usually a very quiet girl, but who was flushed and angry now as she "looked daggers" at Lily Pendleton, who was Hester Grimes's chum.

"That will do, Nellie!" exclaimed the instructor. "You girls evidently have not taken to heart what I have been telling you. The only way to play this—or any other team game—is to work together and talk as little as possible. And by no means allow your tempers to become heated.

"We have formed a new line-up for the fall series of games with East and West High, and the highs of Keyport and Lumberport. It would be too bad to change the make-up of the team later; but I want girls on our champion team, who play the first class teams of other schools, who know how to keep cool and to keep their mouths shut. Now! don't let me have to repeat this again to-day at least. Time!"

Hester Grimes turned and gave Nellie Agnew an angry look and then went on playing. The

girls officiating at the lines changed with the actual players. Later they shifted again, which brought the first team into the field once more with the ball.

When the practice was over Mrs. Case stopped Hester Grimes before she could run off the field. She spoke to her in a low voice, so that no other girl could hear; but she spoke firmly:

"Hester, you are making a bad impression upon the teachers as well as on the minds of your fellow pupils by your indulgence in bad temper."

"Nobody else calls me down for it but you, Mrs. Case," declared the big girl, bitterly.

"You are a good scholar—you do not fail at your books," Mrs. Case continued, quietly. "You do not have occasion in the classroom to often show your real disposition. Here, in matters of athletics, it is different. Your deportment does not suit me——"

"It never has, Mrs. Case," exclaimed the red-faced girl. "You have criticized me ever since you came here to Central High——"

"Stop, Hester! How dare you speak that way to a teacher? I shall certainly report you to Mr. Sharp if you take my admonition in such a spirit. I have finished with you. If you do not show improvement in deportment on the

athletic field I shall shut you out of practice entirely."

The instructor spoke sharply and her face was clouded. She was a very brisk, decisive woman, and she considered that she had been patient with Hester Grimes long enough.

Hester was the only daughter of a very wealthy wholesale butcher, and from her babyhood had been indulged and given her way. She was one of those girls who fairly "boss" their parents and everybody around their homes. She had bought the friendliness of some weak girls by her display and the lavish use of spending money. Perhaps, however, Lily Pendleton was really the only girl who cared for Hester.

Most of the girls who had been relieved from basketball practice had run in to change to their street clothing. On the lower floor of the gymnasium building was the swimming pool, shower baths, and dressing room, besides the lockers for field materials, the doctor's and instructor's offices, and the hair-drying room. Above was the gymnasium proper with all the indoor apparatus allowed by the rules of the Girls' Branch.

Each girl had her own locker and key, the key to be handed in at the instructor's office when she left the building. When Hester came into the long dressing room there was a chatter of

voices and laughter. There was no restriction on talking in here.

Lily met her chum at the door. The former was naturally a pale girl, rather pretty, but much given to aping fashions and frocks of grown women.

"I'd like to box that Bobby Hargrew's ears," she said, to her angry chum. "She was just saying that you'd queer the team again before you got through. She's always hinting that you lost that last game we played East High last spring."

"I'll just fix her for that—the mean little thing!" snapped Hester, and being just in the mood for quarreling she stalked over to where little Clara Hargrew was talking to a group of friends, among whom were Nellie Agnew and the Lockwood twins.

"So you're slandering me, as usual, are you, Miss?" demanded Hester, her face very fiery and her voice very loud.

"Meaning me?" demanded Bobby, shaking her curly head, and grinning impishly at the bigger girl.

"Who else would I mean, Miss?" pursued Hester.

"I couldn't slander you, Hessie," said the mischief-loving Bobby.

"You are a trouble-maker all the time, Bobby Hargrew——" began the older girl, but Bobby broke in with:

"If I made anywhere near as much trouble as you do about this gymnasium, Hessie, I'd talk soft."

"Now, Bobby!" cautioned Nellie Agnew, laying a quick hand upon the smaller girl's arm and drawing her away.

But Hester, quite beside herself, lifted her palm and struck at Bobby. Perhaps the agile girl dodged; or maybe Nellie deliberately stepped forward. Anyhow, the stroke intended for Bobby landed full upon Nellie's cheek. Hester was strong and her hand heavy. The print of her palm left a white patch for a moment upon the plump cheek of the doctor's daughter.

"Now you've done it, Hessie!" cried Bobby, angrily. "See what you've done!"

"I didn't——" began Hester, rather startled by the result of her blow; but the tears of anger and pain had sprung to Nellie's eyes and for once the peacemaker showed some spirit.

"It served you just right! You're always interfering," flashed out Hester.

"You are a bad and cruel girl," said Nellie, sobbing, but more in anger than pain.

"Bah! you run and tell Mrs. Case now. That will be about your style."

"I shall tell my father," said Nellie, firmly, and turned away that her enemy might not exult longer in her tears.

"And he's our physician and I guess he'll have something to say about your actions, Hessie!" cried Bobby Hargrew. "You're not fit to play with nice girls, anyway."

"And you're one of the 'nice' ones, I suppose, Miss?" scoffed Hester.

"I hope I am. I don't lose my temper and queer my team-mates' play. And nobody ever caught me doing mean things—and you've been caught before. If it wasn't for Gee Gee favoring you, you'd have been asked to leave Central High before now," cried Bobby.

"That's so, too," said one of the twins, quite as angry as Bobby, but more quietly.

"I should worry!" laughed Hester, loudly and scornfully. "What if I did leave Central High? You girls are a lot of stuck-up ninnies, anyway! I hate you all, and I'll get square with you some day—you just see if I don't!"

It was perhaps an empty threat; yet it was spoken with grim determination on Hester Grimes's part. And only the future could tell if she would or would not keep her promise.

CHAPTER II

THE KERNEL IN THE ATHLETIC NUT

THE Girls' Branch Athletic League of Central High had been in existence only a few months. Gymnasium work, folk dancing, rowing and swimming, walking and some field sports had been carried to a certain point under the supervision of instructors engaged by Centerport's Board of Education before the organization of the girls themselves into an association which, with other school clubs, held competitions in all these, and other, athletics for trophies and prizes.

Centerport, a lively and wealthy inland city located on the shore of Lake Luna, boasted three high schools—the East and West Highs, and the newer and large Central High, which was built in "the Hill" section of the town, the best residential district, on an eminence overlooking the lake and flanked on either side and landward, as well, by the business portions of the city. The finest estates of the Hill district sloped down to the shore of the lake.

Public interest had long since been aroused in the boys' athletics; but that in girls' similar development had lagged until the spring previous to the opening of our story.

In the first volume of this series, entitled "The Girls of Central High; Or, Rivals for All Honors," was related the organization of the Girls' Branch, and the early difficulties and struggles of a group of girl sophomores, most of whom were now on the roster of the basketball team as named in our first chapter. Laura Belding was the leading character in that first volume, and her quick-wittedness and loyalty to the school and to the athletic association really brought about, as has been intimated, the building of a fine gymnasium for the girls of Central High and the preparation of the athletic field connected therewith.

In "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna; Or, The Crew That Won," the second volume of the series, was narrated the summer aquatic sports of the girls and their boy friends; and in that story the Lockwood twins, Dora and Dorothy, came to the fore as champion canoeists among the girls, as well as efficient members of the crew of the eight-oared shell, which won the prize cup offered by the Luna Boat Club to the champion shell rowed by high school girls.

Lake Luna was a beautiful body of water, all of twenty miles in length, with Rocky River flowing into it from the west at Lumberport, and Rolling River carrying off her overflow at the east end of the lake, where stood the third of the trio of towns—Keyport. Both Lumberport and Keyport had a well conducted high school, and the girls in both were organized for athletics as were the three chief schools of Centerport.

South of Centerport was a range of low hills, through which the two railroads which tapped the territory wound their way through deep cuts and tunnels. In the middle of the lake was Cavern Island, a very popular amusement park at one end, but at its eastern end wild and rocky enough. The northern shore of the lake was skirted by farms and deep woods, with a goodly mountain range in the distance.

The girls who had been in the first class at basketball practice began to troop out of the gymnasium in their street apparel. Chetwood Belding and his chum, Lance Darby, were waiting for Laura and Jess Morse. With them was a gangling, goose-necked youth, dressed several degrees beyond the height of fashion. This was Prettyman Sweet, the acknowledged "glass of fashion and mould of form" among the boys of Central High.

"Hullo! here's Pretty!" cried Bobby Hargrew, dancing out behind Laura and Jess. "You're never waiting to beau *me* home, are you, Mr. Sweet?"

"I—oh—ah——" stammered Purt, in much confusion. "It weally would give me pleasure, Miss Bobby; but I weally have a pwior engagement—ah!"

Just then Hester and Lily came out of the door. Bobby dodged Hester in mock alarm. Lily stopped in the shelter of the doorway to powder her nose, holding up a tiny mirror that she might do it effectively, and then dropping both mirror and "powder rag" into the little "vanity case" she wore pendant from her belt.

Purt Sweet approached Miss Pendleton with a mixture of diffidence and dancing school deportment that made Bobby shriek with laughter.

"Oh, joy!" whispered the latter to Nellie, who appeared next with the Lockwood twins. "Purt has found a shrine before which to lay his heart's devotion. D'ye see *that?*" pointing derisively to Lily and young Sweet turning the first corner.

Hester was strolling away by herself. Nellie said, quickly:

"Let's not go *this* way. I don't want to meet that girl again to-night."

"Much obliged to you, Nell, for taking my

slapping. But Hester never really meant to hit me, after all. You got in the way, you know."

"You'd better behave," said one of the twins admonishingly. "You made this trouble, Bobby."

"There you go!" cried Bobby, with apparent tears. "Nobody loves me; Hester tried to slap me, and Pretty Sweet wouldn't even walk with me. Oh, and say!" she added, with increased hilarity, "what do you suppose the boys are telling about Pretty now?"

"Couldn't say," said Dora Lockwood. "Something ridiculous, I venture to believe."

"It's *funny*," giggled Bobby. "You see, Purt thinks he's really getting whiskers."

"No!" exclaimed Dorothy.

"Sure. You watch him next time you have a chance. He's always feeling to see if his sidetapes have sprouted. He *has* got a little yellow fuzz on his upper lip—honest!

"Well, Purt went into Jimmy Fabro's shop the other day—you know, that hair-cutting place right behind Mr. Belding's store, on the side street? Well, Purt went in and took a chair. Jimmy was alone.

"'What you want—hair cut again this week, Pretty?' asked Jimmy.

"'No—o,' says Purt. 'Sh—sh—shave.'

"Jimmy grunted, dropped back the chair, muffled Purt up in the towels, and then squinted up and down his victim's cheeks. Finally he mumbled something about being 'right back' and ran into Mr. Belding's and came back with a watchmaker's glass stuck in his eye. Then he squinted up and down Purt's face some more and finally mixed a big mug of lather—and lathered Purt's eyebrows!"

"Oh! what for?" demanded Dora Lockwood.

"That's what Purt asked him," giggled Bobby. "Jimmy said in his gruff way:

"'I'm hanged if I can see hair anywhere else on your face, Pretty. You want your eyebrows shaved off, don't ye, Pretty?' So, Chet says, Purt's been trying to shave himself since then in a piece of broken mirror out in the wood shed, and with a jack-knife."

Although Nellie Agnew laughed, too, at Bobby's story, she was in no jolly mood when she parted from the other girls and entered Dr. Agnew's premises.

The doctor, Nellie's father, was a broadly educated physician—one of the small class of present day medical men who, like the "family doctor" of a past generation, claimed no "specialty" and treated everything from mumps to a broken leg. He was a rather full-bodied man, with a pink,

wrinkled face, cleanly shaven every morning of his life; black hair with silver threads in it and worn long; old-fashioned detachable cuffs to his shirts, and a black string tie that went around his collar twice, the ends of which usually fluttered in the breeze.

There had long since been established between the good doctor and his daughter a confidential relation very beautiful to behold. Mrs. Agnew was a very lovely woman, rather stylish in dress, and much given to church and club work. Perhaps that is why Dr. Agnew had made such a comrade of Nellie. She might, otherwise, have lacked any personal guide at a time in her life when she most needed it.

It was no new thing, therefore, that Nellie should follow the doctor into the office that evening after dinner, and perch on the broad arm of his desk chair while he lit the homely pipe that he indulged in once a day—usually before the rush of evening patients.

When Nellie had told her father all about the unpleasant quarrel at the gymnasium the doctor smoked thoughtfully for several minutes. Then he said, in his clear, quiet voice—the calm quality of which Nellie had herself inherited:

"Do you know what seems to me to be the kernel in the nut of these school athletics, Nell?"

"What is it, Daddy Doctor?"

"Loyalty. That's the kernel—loyalty. If your athletics and games don't teach you that, you might as well give 'em up—all of you girls. The feminine sex is not naturally loyal; now, don't get mad!" and the doctor chuckled. "It is not a natural virtue—if *any* virtue is humanly natural—of the sex. It's only the impulsive, spitfire girls who are naturally loyal—the kind who will fight for another girl. Among boys it is different. Now, I am not praising boys, or putting them an iota higher than girls. Only, long generations of working and fighting together has made the normal male loyal to his kind. It is an instinct—and even our friends who call themselves suffragettes have still to acquire it.

"But this isn't to be a lecture, Nell. It's just a piece of advice. Show yourself loyal to the other girls of Central High, and to the betterment of basketball and the other athletics, by——"

"By what?" cried Nellie.

"By paying no attention to Hester Grimes, or what she does. After all, her shame, if she is removed from your basketball team, is the shame of her whole class, and of the school as well. Ignore her mean ways if you can. Don't get in the way of her hand again, Nell," and his eyes twinkled. "Remember, that blow was not in-

tended for you, in the first place. And I am not sure that Clara Hargrew would not sometimes be the better for the application of somebody's hand—in the old-fashioned way! No, Nell. Say nothing. Make no report of the affair. If Hester is disloyal, don't you be. Keep out of her way as much as possible——"

"But she spoiled our games with the other schools last spring, and she will do so again," complained Nellie.

"Then let Mrs. Case, or somebody else, be the one to set the matter in motion of removing Hester from the team. That's my advice, Miss."

"And of course I shall take it, Daddy Doctor," said Nellie slowly. "But I *did* think it was a chance for us to get rid of Hester. She is *such* a plague."

The doctor's eyes twinkled. "I wonder why it is that we always want to shift our burdens on other folks' shoulders? Do you suppose either the East or West Highs would find Hester any more bearable if she attended them instead of Central?"

The girls of Central High had something of more moment than Hester Grimes's "tantrums" to think of the next day. Bobby Hargrew came flying up the path to the doctor's porch long be-

fore school time. Nellie saw her and ran out to see what she wanted.

"What do you s'pose?" cried Bobby.

"Couldn't guess, Chicken-little," laughed Nellie. "Has the sky fallen?"

"Almost as bad," declared Bobby, twinkling, but immediately becoming grave. "The gymnasium——"

"Not burned!"

"No, no! But it's been entered. And by some awfully mean person. The apparatus on the upper floor has been partly destroyed, and the lockers broken into downstairs and lots of the field materials spoiled. Oh, it's dreadfully mean, Nellie! They even sawed through the rungs of the hanging ladders a little way, so that if anybody swung on them they'd break.

"And with all the harm they did, nobody can tell how they got into the building, or out again. The watchman sleeps on the premises. You know, he's not supposed to keep awake all night, for the same man keeps the field in repair during the day. But my father says that Jackway, the watchman, must have slept like the dead if he didn't hear the marauders while they were damaging all that apparatus.

"It's just too mean," concluded Bobby. "There isn't a basketball that isn't cut to pieces,

and the tennis ball boxes were broken open and the balls all thrown into the swimming pool. Tennis rackets were slashed, hockey sticks sawed in two, and other dreadful things done. It shows that whoever did it must have had a grudge against the athletic association and us girls—must have just *hated* us!"

"And who hates us?" cried Nellie, the question popping out before she thought.

Bobby turned rather white, though her eyes shone. She tapped Nellie on the shoulder with an insistent index finger.

"You and I know who *says* she hates us," whispered the younger girl.

CHAPTER III

JOHNNY DOYLE

FRANKLIN SHARP, principal of Central High, had something particular to say that morning at Assembly. At eight-thirty o'clock the gongs rang in each room and the classes marched to the hall as usual. But there was an unusual amount of excitement, especially on the girls' side of the great hall.

The news Bobby Hargrew had brought to Nellie Agnew had spread over the Hill long before schooltime. Bobby, running from house to house, had scattered the news like burning brands; and wherever she dropped a spark a flame of excitement had sprung up and spread.

And how many of the girls had whispered the same thing! What Hester Grimes had said the previous afternoon had been heard by a dozen girls; a hundred had learned of it before the gymnasium had cleared that afternoon; now the whole school—on the girls' side, at least—knew that Hester had declared her hatred of the girls

of Central High before the damage was done in the gymnasium.

This gossip could not fail to have flown to Principal Sharp's ears. He was eminently a just man; but he seldom interfered in the girls' affairs, preferring to let his assistant, Miss Grace G. Carrington (otherwise "Gee Gee" among the more thoughtless of her pupils) govern the young ladies. But what the principal said on this occasion seemed to point to the fact that he had taken cognizance of the wild supposition and gossip that was going the round of the girl's classes.

"A cruel and expensive trick has been perpetrated by some irresponsible person with pronounced criminal instincts," declared Mr. Sharp, seriously. "This is not the outburst of some soul prone to practical joking, so-called; nor is it the mere impish mischievousness of a spirit with a grudge against its fellows. The infamous actions of the person, or persons, in the girls' gymnasium last night show degeneracy and a monkeyish wickedness that can be condoned in no particular.

"We can declare with confidence that no pupil of Central High could have accomplished the wicked work of last night. It would have been beyond the physical powers of any of our young

ladies to have broken into the building; and we are equally confident that no young gentleman on our roster is at that early stage of evolution in which he would consider such work at all amusing.

"Of course, there will be an investigation made—not alone by the school authorities, but by the police. The matter is too serious to ignore. The damage done amounts to several hundreds of dollars. And the mystery of how the culprit or culprits, entered the building, with the doors and windows locked and Jackway asleep in his bed in the doctor's office, must likewise be explained.

"Meanwhile, young ladies and gentlemen, let no wild romances, or unsubstantiated rumors shake your minds. We none of us know how the criminal entered the gymnasium, or who he is. Let the matter rest there until the investigation is completed and the actual wrong-doer brought to book. I hope I make myself clear? That is all. You are dismissed to classes."

But, to himself, perhaps the principal said: "Meanwhile I will go out and stop the water from running down hill!" For the gossip having once begun to grow, there was no stopping it. Some of the girls had already begun to look askance at Hester when they passed her. Others

whispered, and wondered, and surmised—and the wonder grew like the story of the man who ate the three black crows.

Hester, however, did not realize what all this meant. She was still angry with Nellie, and Bobby, and the others whom she considered had crossed her the previous afternoon. And especially was she angry with Mrs. Case, the physical instructor.

"I don't much care if the stuff in the gymnasium *was* all cut up," she declared, to her single confidant, Lily Pendleton.

"Oh, Hester! Don't let them hear you say it!" cried her chum, who had heard some of the whispers against Hester, but had not dared repeat them to her chum for fear of an outbreak of the latter's unfortunate temper.

"What do I care for 'em?" returned Hester, and went off by herself.

Hester Grimes was not entirely happy. She would not admit it in her own soul, but she was lonely. Even Lily was not always at her beck and call as she once had been. To tell the truth, Lily Pendleton seemed suddenly to have "a terrible crush" on Prettyman Sweet.

"And goodness only knows what she sees in that freak to want to walk with him," muttered Hester, in retrospection.

Lily and Purt were pupils in the same dancing class and just at present dancing was "all the rage." Hester did not care for dancing—not even for the folk dancing that Mrs. Case taught the girls of Central High. She liked more vigorous exercises. She played a sharp game of tennis, played hockey well, was a good walker and runner, and liked basketball as well as she liked anything.

"And here these Miss Smarties and Mrs. Case want to put me off the team," thought Hester Grimes, walking down toward the athletic field and the gym. building after school that day.

There was little to go to the gym. for just now, with the fixtures cut up and broken. But Hester felt a curiosity to see the wreck. And there were other girls from Central High who seemed to feel the same. Some were ahead of her and some came after. They exclaimed and murmured and were angry or excited, as the case might be; but Hester mooned about in silence, and the only soul she spoke to in the building was Bill Jackway.

The latter looked very much worried. He was a steady, quiet, red-haired man, with pale blue eyes and a wandering expression of countenance at most times. But he was a good and careful

worker and kept the athletic field in good shape and the gym. well swept and dusted.

Jackway had never been married; but his sister had married a man named Doyle and was now a widow with two children. When Jackway got an hour or two off from the gym. he went to see his sister, and played with the baby, Johnny. Johnny, who was a sturdy little fellow of three, had been brought to-day to see his uncle by his gangling big brother, Rufe Doyle. Rufe was a second edition of his uncle, Bill Jackway, without Bill's modicum of sense. A glance at Rufe told the pitiful story. As his Irish father had said, Rufe was "an innocent." But he loved Baby Johnny and took great care of him.

"Johnny's growing like a weed, Rufie," said Hester, kindly enough, as she pinched the little fellow's cheek softly. "You take such good care of him."

Rufe threw back his head, opened his mouth wide, and roared his delight at this compliment.

"Yes, ma'am!" he chuckled, when his paroxysm was over. "Johnny ain't much out of my sight when he's awake. Is he, Uncle Bill?"

"No, Rufus," replied Jackway, sadly.

"I'm pretty smart to take care of Johnny so well—ain't I, Uncle Bill?" demanded the weak-minded boy again.

"You are smart enough when you want to be, Rufus," muttered Jackway, evidently in no very social mood.

"You're worried about what happened last night, aren't you?" demanded Hester, sharply.

"Yes, ma'am; I be," admitted the watchman.

"You needn't be. They'll never blame you," returned Hester, brusquely, and went out.

She wandered into the park at the foot of Whiffle Street and sat down. Here Rufus Doyle followed her with Baby Johnny. There had been heavy rains for the past week—until the day before. The gutters had run full and the park squad of "white wings" were raking the beaten leaves into windrows and flushing the sand and debris into the sewers. One basin cover had been laid back and left an open trap for unwary feet.

Rufus Doyle was trying to coax a gray squirrel near for Johnny to admire. But Johnny was not particularly interested in bunny. Hester saw the toddler near the open hatch of the sewer basin one moment; the next he had disappeared, and it seemed to her as though a faint cry rang in her ears.

She leaped up from the bench.

"Johnny!" she called.

Rufus was still engaged with the squirrel. Nobody seemed to have noticed the disappearance of the baby. Hester dashed to the open basin and peered down into the swirling brown water.

CHAPTER IV

"THERE'S GOOD STUFF IN THAT GIRL"

AGAIN that cry—that weak, bubbling wail from out the darkness of the sewer basin. Something swirled past Hester's strained vision in the dervish dance of the debris floating in the murky water. It was a tiny hand, stretched forth from a skimpy blue-cloth sleeve.

It was Johnny Doyle's hand; but the child's body—the rest of it—was under water!

The water was not more than six feet below the surface of the ground; but deep, deep down was the entrance of the big drain that joined the main sewer taking the street water and sewerage from the whole Hill section. Johnny was being sucked down into that drain.

The girl, her mind keenly alert to all this, shrieked unintelligible cries for help—unintelligible to herself, even. She could not have told afterward a word she said, or what manner of help she demanded; but she knew the boy was drowning *and that she could swim!*

With her clothing to hold her up a bit, Hes-

ter believed she could swim or keep afloat even in that swirling eddy. The appealing little hand had no more than waved blindly once, than Hester gathered her rather full skirts about her and jumped, feet first, into the sewer-basin.

That was no pleasant plunge, for, despite her skirts, Hester went down over her head. But her hands, thrashing about in the water, caught the baby's dress. She came up with Johnny in her arms, and when she had shaken the water from her eyes so that she could see, above was the brown face of one of the street cleaners. He was lowering a bucket on a rope, and yelling to her.

What he said Hester did not know; but she saw her chance, and placed little Johnny—now a limp, pale rag of a boy—in the bucket, and the man drew him up with a yell of satisfaction.

Hester was not frightened for herself. She felt the tug of the eddy at her feet; but she trod water and kept herself well above the surface until the man dropped the bucket down again. Then she saw the wild eyes and pallid, frightened face of Rufus at the opening, too; and a third anxious countenance. She knew that this belonged to Nellie Agnew's father.

"Hang on, child!" exclaimed the physician, heartily. "We'll have you out in a jiffy."

Hester clung to the rope and was glad to be dragged out of the filthy basin. She sat on the ground, almost breathless, for a moment. Rufe, with a wild cry, had sprung to Johnny. But the doctor put the half-witted lad aside and examined the child.

"Bless him! he isn't hurt a mite," declared Dr. Agnew, cheerfully. "Run, get a taxi, Rufe! Quick, now! I'll take you and Johnny, and Miss Hester, too, home in it."

Everybody was used to obeying the good doctor's commands, and Rufus Doyle ran as he was told. Hester was on her feet when the cab returned, and Dr. Agnew was holding the bedraggled and still unconscious Johnny in his arms.

"We'll take you home first, Hester," said Dr. Agnew. "You live nearest."

"No, no!" exclaimed Hester. "Go by the way of Mrs. Doyle's house. The baby ought to be 'tended to first."

"Why, that's so," admitted the physician, and he looked at her a little curiously.

Hester whisked into the cab and hid herself from the curious gaze of the few passers-by who had gathered when the trouble was all over. The taxi bore them all swiftly to the Doyles' humble domicile. It was on a street in which electric cabs were not commonly driven, and Rufe was

mighty proud when he descended first into a throng of the idle children and women of the neighborhood.

Of course, the usual officious neighbor, after one glance at Johnny's wet figure, had to rush into the house and proclaim that the boy had been drowned in the lake. But the doctor was right on her heels and showed Mrs. Doyle in a few moments that Johnny was all right.

With a hot drink, and warm blankets for a few hours, and a good sleep, the child would be as good as new. But when the doctor came out of the house he was surprised to find the cab still in waiting and Hester inside.

"Why didn't you go home at once and change your clothing?" demanded Dr. Agnew, sharply, as he hopped into the taxi again.

"Is Johnny all right?" asked Hester.

"Of course he is."

"Then I'll go home," sighed Hester. "Oh, I sha'n't get cold, Doctor. I'm no namby-pamby girl—I hope! And I was afraid the little beggar would be in a bad way. He must have swallowed a quantity of water."

"He was frightened more than anything else," declared Dr. Agnew, aloud. But to himself he was thinking: "There's good stuff in that girl, after all."

For he, too, had heard the whispers that had begun to go the rounds of the Hill, and knew that Hester Grimes was on trial in the minds of nearly everybody whom she would meet. Some had already judged and sentenced her, as well!

CHAPTER V

HESTER AT HOME

If Hester had arrived at the Grimes's house in two cabs instead of one it would have aroused her mother to little comment; for, for some years now, her daughter had grown quite beyond her control and Mrs. Grimes had learned not to comment upon Hester's actions. Yet, oddly enough, Hester was neither a wild girl nor a silly girl; she was merely bold, bad tempered, and wilful.

Mrs. Grimes was a large, lymphatic lady, given to loose wrappers until late in the day, and the enjoyment of unlimited novels. "Comfort above all" was the good lady's motto. She had suffered much privation and had worked hard, during Mr. Grimes's beginnings in trade, for Hester's father had worked up from an apprentice butcher boy in a retail store—was a "self-made man."

Mr. Grimes was forever talking about how he had made his own way in the world without the help of any other person; but he was, never-

theless, purse-proud and arrogant. Hester could not fail to be somewhat like her father in this. She believed that Money was the touchstone of all good in the world. But Mrs. Grimes was naturally a kindly disposed woman, and sometimes her mother's homely virtues cropped out in Hester—as note her interest in the Doyles. She was impulsively generous, but expected to find the return change of gratitude for every kindly dollar she spent.

They had a big and ornate house, in which the servants did about as they liked for all of Mrs. Grimes's oversight. The latter admitted that she knew how to do a day's wash as well as any woman—perhaps would have been far more happy had she been obliged to do such work, too; but she had no executive ability, and the girls in the kitchen did well or ill as they listed.

Now that Hester was growing into a young lady, she occasionally went into the servants' quarters and tried to set things right in imitation of her father's blustering oversight of his slaughter house—without Mr. Grimes's thorough knowledge of the work and conditions in hand. So Hester's interference in domestic affairs usually resulted in a "blow-up" of all concerned and a scramble for new servants at the local agencies.

Under these circumstances it may be seen that the girl's home life was neither happy nor inspiring. The kindly, gentle things of life escaped Hester Grimes. She unfortunately scorned her mother for her "easy" habits; she admired her father's bullying ways and his ability to make money. And she missed the sweetening influence of a well-conducted home where the inmates are polite and kind to one another.

Hester was abundantly healthy, possessed personal courage to a degree—as Dr. Agnew had observed—was not naturally unkind, and had other qualities that, properly trained and moulded, would have made her a very nice girl indeed. But having no home restraining influences, the rough corners of Hester Grimes's character had never been smoothed down.

Her friendship with Lily Pendleton was not like the "chumminess" of other girls. Lily's mother came of one of the "first families" of Centerport, and moved in a circle that the Grimeses could never hope to attain, despite their money. Through her friendship with Lily, who was in miniature already a "fine lady," Hester obtained a slight hold upon the fringe of society. But even Lily was lost to her at times.

"Why ain't I seen your friend Lily so much

lately?" asked Mrs. Grimes, languidly, the evening of the day Hester had plunged into the sewer and rescued little Johnny Doyle.

"Oh, between dancing school and Purt Sweet, Lil has about got her silly head turned," said Hester, tossing her own head.

"My goodness me!" drawled Mrs. Grimes, "that child doesn't take young Purt Sweet seriously, does she?"

"Whoever heard of anybody's taking Pretty seriously?" laughed Hester. "Only Pretty himself believes that he has anything in his head but mush! Last time Mrs. Pendleton had an evening reception, Purt got an invite, and went. Something happened to him—he knocked over a vase, or trod on a lady's dress, or something awkward—and the next afternoon Lil caught him walking up and down in front of their house, trying to screw up courage enough to ring the bell.

"'What's the matter, Purt?' asked Lily, going up to him.

"'Oh, Miss Lily!' cries Purt. 'What did your mother say when you told her I was sorry for having made a fool of myself at the party last night?'

"'Why,' says Lil, 'she said she didn't notice anything unusual in your actions.'

"Wasn't *that* a slap? And now Lil is letting Purt run around with her and act as if he owned her—just because he's a good dancer."

"My dear!" yawned her mother. "I should think you'd join that dancing class."

"I'll wait till I'm asked, I hope," muttered Hester. "Everybody doesn't get to join it. We're not in that set—and we might as well admit it. And I don't believe we ever will be."

"I'm certainly glad!" complained her mother, rustling the leaves of her book. "Your father is always pushing me into places where I don't want to go. He had a deal in business with Colonel Swayne, and he insisted that I call on Mrs. Kerrick. They're awfully stuck-up folks, Hess."

"I see Mrs. Kerrick's carriage standing at the Beldings' gate quite often, just the same," muttered Hester.

"Yes—I know," said her mother. "They make a good deal of Laura. Well, they didn't make much of me. When I walked into the grounds and started up the front stoop, a butler, or footman, or something, all togged up in livery, told me that I must go around to the side door if I had come to see the cook. And he didn't really seem anxious to take my card."

"Oh, Mother!" exclaimed Hester.

"You needn't tell your father. I don't blame

'em. They've got their own friends and we've got ourn. No use pushing out of our class."

"You should have gone in the carriage," complained Hester.

"I don't like that stuffy hack," said her mother. "It smells of—of liv'ry stables and—and funerals! If your father would set up a carriage of his own——"

"Or buy an automobile instead of hiring one for us occasionally," finished Hester.

For with all his love of display, the wholesale butcher was a thrifty person.

With Lily so much interested for the time in other matters, Hester found her only recreation at the athletic field; and for several days after the mysterious raid upon the girls' gymnasium there was not much but talk indulged in about the building. Then new basketballs were procured and the regular practice in that game went on.

In a fortnight would come the first interschool match of the fall term—a game between Central High girls and the representative team of East High of Centerport. In the last match game the East High girls had won—and many of the girls of Central High believed that the game went to their competitors because of Hester Grimes's fouling.

There was more talk of this now. Some of

the girls did not try to hide their dislike for Hester. Nellie Agnew did not speak to her at all, and the latter was inclined to accuse Nellie of being the leader in this apparent effort to make Hester feel that she was looked upon with more than suspicion. The mystery of the gymnasium raid overshadowed the whole school; but the shadow fell heaviest on Hester Grimes.

"She did it!"

"She's just mean enough to do it!"

"She said she hated us!"

"It's just like her—she spoils everything she can't boss!"

She could read these expressions on the lips of her fellow students. Hester Grimes began to pay for her ill-temper, and the taste of this medicine was bitter indeed.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST GAME

It would have been hard to tell how the suspicion took form among the girls of Central High that Hester Grimes knew more than she should regarding the gymnasium mystery. Whether she had spoiled the paraphernalia herself, or hired somebody to do it for her, was the point of the discussion carried on wherever any of the girls—especially those of her own class—met for conference.

Older people scoffed at the idea of a girl having committed the crime. And, indeed, it was a complete mystery how the marauder got into the building and out again. Bill Jackway, the watchman, was worried almost sick over it; he was afraid of losing his job.

Bobby Hargrew was about the only girl in Central High who "lost no sleep over the affair," as she expresesd it. And that wasn't because she was not keenly interested in the mystery. Indeed, like Nellie, she had seen at the

beginning that suspicion pointed to Hester Grimes. And perhaps Bobby believed at the bottom of her heart that Hester had brought about the destruction. Bobby and Hester had forever been at daggers' points.

Bobby, however, was as full of mischief and fun as ever.

"Oh, girls!" she exclaimed, to a group waiting at the girls' entrance to the school building one morning. "I've got the greatest joke on Gee Gee! Listen to it."

"What have you done now, you bad, bad child?" demanded Nellie. "You'll miss playing goal guard against East High if you don't look out. Miss Carrington is watching you."

"She's always watching me," complained Bobby. "But this joke can't put a black mark against *me,* thank goodness!"

"What is it, Bobby?" asked Dorothy Lockwood.

"Don't keep us on tenter-hooks," urged her twin.

"Why, Gee Gee called at Alice Long's yesterday afternoon. You know, she is bound to make a round of the girls' homes early in the term—she always does. And Alice Long was able to return to school this fall."

"And I'm glad of that," said Dorothy. "She'll finish her senior year and graduate."

"Well," chuckled Bobby, "Gee Gee appeared at the house and Tommy, Short and Long's little brother, met her at the door. Alice wasn't in, and Gee Gee opened her cardcase. Out fluttered one of those bits of tissue paper that come between engraved cards—to keep 'em from smudging, you know. Tommy jumped and picked it up, and says he:

"'Say, Missis! you dropped one of your cigarette papers.' Now, what do you know about *that?*" cried Bobby, as the other girls went off into a gale of laughter. "Billy heard him, and it certainly tickled that boy. Think of Gee Gee's feelings!"

Not alone Bobby, but all the members of the basketball team were doing their very best in classes so as to have no marks against them before the game with the East High girls.

Mrs. Case coached them sharply, paying particular attention to Hester. It was too bad that this robust girl, who was so well able to play the game, should mar her playing with roughness and actual rudeness to her fellow-players. And warnings seemed wasted on her.

Hester never received a demerit from Miss Carrington. In class she was always prepared and there was little to ruffle her temper. The instructors — aside from Mrs. Case — seldom found any fault with Hester Grimes.

The game with the crack team of the East High girls was to be played on the latter's court. The girls of Central High had been beaten there in the spring; this afternoon they went over—with their friends—with the hope of returning the spring defeat.

Bobby had been in the audience and led the "rooting" among the girls for Central High at the former game. Now she had graduated from a mere basketball "fan" to a very alert and successful goal guard.

This was Eve Sitz's first important game, too; but the Swiss girl was of a cool and phlegmatic temperament and Laura Belding, as captain, had no fears for her.

The audience was a large one, and was enthusiastic from the start. The girls of Central High always attended the boys' games in force and applauded liberally for their own school team; so Chet Belding and Lance Darby, with a crowd of strong-lunged Central High boys at their backs, cheered their girl friends when they came on the field with the very effective school yell:

"C-e-n, Central High!
C-e-n-t-r-a-l, Central High!
C-e-n-t-r-a-l-h-i-g-h, Central High!
Ziz-z-z-z——
Boom!"

The teams took their places after warming up a little, their physical instructors acting as coaches, while the physical instructor for West High School of Centerport was referee. The officials on the lines were selected from the competing schools.

It was agreed to play two fifteen-minute halves and the ball was put into play by the referee. The girls of Central High played like clockwork for the first five minutes and scored a clean goal. Their friends cheered tumultuously.

When the ball was put into play again there was much excitement. "Shoot it here, Laura! I'm loose!" shouted Bobby, whose slang was always typical of the game she was playing.

"Block her! Block her!" cried the captain of the East High team.

Most of the instructions were supposed to be passed by signal; but the girls would get excited at times and, unless the referee blew her whistle and stopped the play, pandemonium *did* reign on the court once in a while. Suddenly the ball chanced to be snapped to Hester's side of the court. Her opponent got it, and almost instantly the referee's whistle blew.

"That Central High girl at forward center is over-guarding."

"No, I'm not!" snapped Hester.

The lady who acted as referee was a bit hot-tempered herself, perhaps. At least, this flat contradiction brought a most unexpected retort from her lips:

"Central High Captain!"

"Yes, ma'am?" gasped Laura Belding.

"Take out your forward center and put in a substitute for this half."

"But, Miss Lawrence!" cried Laura, aghast.

"You are delaying play, Miss Belding," said the referee, sharply.

Laura looked at Hester with commiseration; but she did not have to speak. The culprit, with a red and angry visage, was already crossing the court toward the dressing rooms. Laura put in Roberta Fish, and play went on.

But the Central High team was rattled. East High got two goals—one from a foul—and so stood in the lead at the end of the half. The visiting team did not work so well together with the substitute player, and the captain of East High, seeing this fact, crowded the play to Roberta Fish's side.

"My goodness!" whispered Bobby Hargrew, as they ran off the field at the end of the half. "I hope that's taught Hester a lesson. And this is once when we need Hester Grimes badly."

"I should say we did," panted Laura.

"We've got to play up some to win back that point we lost, let alone beating them," cried Jess Morse.

Nellie Agnew was the first to enter the dressing room assigned to the Central High girls. She looked around the empty room and gasped.

"What's the matter, Nell?" cried Bobby, crowding in.

"Where is she?" demanded the doctor's daughter.

"Hessie has lit out!" shouted Bobby, turning back to the captain and her team-mates.

"She's got mad and gone home!" declared Jess Morse. "Her hat and coat are gone."

"*Now* what will we do?" cried Dorothy Lockwood.

And the question was echoed from all sides. For without Hester it did not seem possible that the Central High team could hold its own with its opponents.

CHAPTER VII

THE SECOND HALF

THE dressing room buzzed like an angry beehive for a minute. It was Laura Belding, captain of the team, who finally said:

"Hester surely can't have deserted us in this way. She knows that Roberta is not even familiar with our secret signals."

"She's gone, just the same," said her chum, Jess. "That's how mean Hester Grimes is."

"Well, I declare! I don't know that I blame her," cried Lily Pendleton.

"You don't blame her?" repeated Nellie. "I don't believe you'd blame Hester no matter what she did."

"She hasn't done anything," returned Lily, sullenly.

"How about the gym. business——"

Bobby Hargrew began it, but Laura shut her off by a prompt palm laid across her mouth.

"You be still, Bobby!" commanded Nellie Agnew.

"You're all just as unfair to Hessie as you can be," said Lily with some spirit. "And now this woman from West High had to pick on her——"

"Don't talk so foolishly, Lil," said Dora Lockwood. "You know very well that Hester has been warned dozens of times not to talk back to the referee. Mrs. Case warns her almost every practice game about something. And now she has got taken up short. If it wasn't for what it means to us all in this particular game, I wouldn't care if she never played with us."

"Me, too!" cried Jess, in applause. "Hester is always cutting some mean caper that makes trouble for other folk."

"We can't possibly win this game without her!" wailed Dorothy.

"I'll do my very best, girls," said Roberta Fish, the substitute player at forward center.

"Of course you will, Roberta," said Laura, warmly. "But we can't teach you all our moves in these few moments—Ah! here is Mrs. Case."

Their friend and teacher came in briskly.

"What's all this? what's all this?" she cried. "Where is Hester?"

"She took her hat and coat and ran out before we came in, Mrs. Case," explained Laura.

"Not deserted you?" cried the instructor.

"Yes, ma'am."

"But that is a most unsportsmanlike thing to do!" exclaimed the instructor, feeling the desertion keenly. That one of her girls should act so cut Mrs. Case to the heart. She took great pride in the girls of Central High as a body, and Hester's desertion was bad for discipline.

"You must do the best you can, Laura, with the substitute," she said, at last, and speaking seriously. "I will inform Miss Lawrence that you will put in Roberta for the second half, too. Nothing need be said about Hester's defection."

"I am afraid we can't win with me in Hessie's place," wailed Roberta.

"You're going to do your very best, Roberta," said Mrs. Case, calmly. "You always do. All of you put your minds to the task. Your opponents are only one point ahead of you. The first five-minutes' play in the first half was as pretty team work on your part as I ever saw."

"But we can't use our secret signals," said Laura.

"Play your very best. Do not put Roberta into bad pinches——"

"But the captain of the East High team sees our weak point, and forces the play that way," complained Jess Morse.

"Of course she does. And you would do the same were you in her place," said Mrs. Case, with a smile. "But above all, if you can't win grace-

fully, *do* lose gracefully! Be sportsmanlike. Cheer the winners. Now, the whistle will sound in a moment," and the instructor hurried away to speak to the referee.

"Oh dear me!" groaned Roberta. "My heart's in my mouth."

"Then it isn't where Sissy Lowe, one of the freshies, said it was in physiology class yesterday," chuckled Bobby Hargrew.

"How was that, Bobby?" queried Jess.

"Sissy was asked where the heart was situated —what part of the body—and she says:

"'Pleathe, Mith Gould, ith in the north thentral part!' Can you beat those infants?" added Bobby as the girls laughed.

But they were in no mood for laughter when they trotted out upon the basketball court at the sound of the referee's whistle. They took their places in silence, and the roars of the Central High boys, with their prolonged "Ziz—z—z—z ——Boom!" did not sound as encouraging as it had at the beginning of the first half.

Basketball is perhaps the most transparent medium for revealing certain angles of character in young girls. At first the players seldom have anything more than a vague idea of the proper manner of throwing a ball, or the direction in which it is to be thrown.

The old joke about a woman throwing a stone

at a hen and breaking the pane of glass behind her, will soon become a tasteless morsel under the tongue of the humorist. Girls in our great public schools are learning how to throw. And basketball is one of the greatest helps to this end. The woman of the coming generation is going to have developed the same arm and shoulder muscles that man displays, and will be able to throw a stone and hit the hen, if necessary!

The girl beginner at basketball usually has little idea of direction in throwing the ball; nor, indeed, does she seem to distinguish fairly at first between her opponents and her team-mates. Her only idea is to try to propel the ball in the general direction of the goal, the thought that by passing it from one to another of her team mates she will much more likely see it land safely in the basket never seemingly entering her mind.

But once a girl has learned to observe and understand the position and function of team mates and opponents, to consider the chances of the game in relation to the score, and, bearing these things in mind, can form a judgment as to her most advantageous play, and act quickly on it—when she has learned to repress her hysterical excitement and play quietly instead of boisterously, what is it she has gained?

It is self-evident that she has won something beside the mere ability to play basketball. She

has learned to control her emotions—to a degree, at least—through the dictates of her mind. Blind impulse has been supplanted by intelligence. Indeed, she has gained, without doubt, a balance of mind and character that will work for good not only to herself, but to others.

Indeed, it is the following out of the old fact—the uncontrovertible fact of education—that what one learns at school is not so valuable as is the fact that he *learns how to learn.* Playing basketball seriously will help the girl player to control her emotions and her mind in far higher and more important matters than athletics.

To see these eighteen girls in their places, alert, unhurried, watchful, and silent, was not alone a pleasing, but an inspiring sight. Laura and her team mates—even Roberta—waited like veterans for the referee to throw the ball. Laura and her opposing jumping center were on the *qui vive,* muscles taut, and scarcely breathing.

Suddenly the ball went up. Laura sprang for it and felt her palms against the big ball. Instantly she passed it to Jess Morse and within the next few seconds the ball was in play all over the back field—mostly in the hands of Central High girls.

They played hard; but nobody—not even Roberta—played badly. The East High girls were strong opponents, and more than once it

looked as though the ball would be carried by them into a goal. However, on each occasion, some brilliant play by a Central High girl brought it back toward their basket and finally, after six and a half minutes, the visiting team made a goal.

The Central High girls were one point ahead.

The ball went in at center again and there was a quick interchange of plays between the teams. Suddenly, while the ball was flying through the air toward East High's basket, the referee's whistle sounded.

"Foul!" she declared, just as the ball popped into the basket.

A murmur rose from the East High team. Madeline Spink, the captain, said quietly:

"But the goal counts for us, does it not, Miss Lawrence?"

"It counts as a goal from a foul," replied the referee, "which means that it is no goal at all, and the ball is in play."

The East High girls were more than a little disturbed by the decision. It was a nice point; for on occasion a goal thrown from the foul line counts one. It broke up, for the minute the better play of the East High team, and the instant the Central High girls got the ball they rushed it for a goal.

There was great excitement at this point in

the game. If Central High won two clean points it would hardly be possible for East High to recover and gain the lead once more. Laura signalled her players from time to time; but she was hampered whenever the ball came near Roberta, or the time was ripe for a massed play. The substitute did not know all the secret signals.

Had Hester Grimes only been in her place! Her absence crowded the Central High team slowly to the wall. In the very moment of success, when a clean goal was about to be made, they failed and their opponents got the ball. Again it was passed from hand to hand. One girl bounced the ball and a foul was called. Again the Central Highs rushed it, and from the foul line made another goal.

Two points ahead, and the boys in the audience cheered madly. No harder fought battle had ever been played upon that court.

"Shoot it over, Jess!" roared Chet, at one point, rising and waving to his particular girl friend, madly. "Look out! they'll get you!"

"Look out, Laura! don't let 'em get you—— Aw! that's too bad," grumbled Lance Darby, quite as interested in the work of Chet's sister on the court.

"Hi! no fair pulling! Say! where's the referee's eyes?" demanded Chet, the next moment, in disgust.

"Behind her glasses," said his chum. "I never did believe four eyes were as good as two."

The ball came back to center again and there was little delay before it was put in play. Only three minutes remained. The eighteen girls were as eager as they could be. Madeline Spink and her team mates were determined to tie the score at least. A clean goal would do it.

They rushed the play and carried the ball into Roberta's country. Roberta never had a chance! In a moment the ball was hurtling toward the proper East High girl, and no guarding could save it.

A cheer from the audience—those interested in the East High girls—announced another clean goal. The score was tied and two minutes to play!

"Do not delay the game, young ladies!" warned the referee.

They were in position again and the ball was thrown up. No fumbles now. Every girl was playing for all that there was in her! 'A' single point would decide the rivalry of the two schools at the beginning of the playing season. To lead off with this first game would encourage either team immeasurably.

East High led off first; but quickly Laura and her team mates got the ball again and pushed it

toward the basket. There was no rough play. The umpires, as well as the referee, watched sharply. It was a sturdy, vigorous, but fair game. This was a time when Hester's hot temper might have brought the team disgrace; and for a moment Laura was, after all, glad that the delinquent had gone home.

Then, suddenly, from full field and a fair position, the ball rose and flew directly for the basket. While in mid-air the whistle was blown. Time was called and the game was ended.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROUND ROBIN

The spectators, as well as the players, held their breath and watched the flying ball. Although the whistle had blown, the goal—if the ball settled into the basket—would count for the visiting team. This one unfinished play would give the girls of Central High two clear points in the lead if all went well.

The course of the flying ball was watched by all eyes, therefore. Chet Belding and his mates began their chant, believing that the ball was sure to go true to the basket.

But they began too soon. The ball hit the ring of the basket, hovered a moment over it, and then fell back and rolled into the court! Chet's chant of praise changed to a groan. The game was over—and it was a tie.

Disappointed as the girls of Central High were, they cheered their opponents nobly, and the East High girls cheered them. The audience had to admit that the game had been keenly fought and—after Hester was put out of it—as

cleanly as a basketball game had ever been played on those grounds.

Miss Lawrence, the referee, came to the Central High girls' dressing room and complimented Laura and her team on their playing.

"I was sorry to put off your forward center, Miss Belding, in the first half. If you had brought her into the field in the second half your team, without doubt, would have won," said the referee. "That girl is a splendid player, but she needs to learn to control her temper."

"That's always the way!" cried Nellie Agnew, when the West High instructor was gone. "Hester spoils everything."

"She crabs every game we play," growled Bobby, both sullen and slangy.

"She ought to be put off the team for good," said one of the twins.

"That's so," chimed in her sister.

"We'll never win this season if Hessie is included in this team," declared Jess Morse.

Even Lily Pendleton could find nothing to say now in favor of her chum. She hurried away from the others girls, and the seven remaining seriously discussed the situation. It was Nellie, despite her promise to her father, who came out boldly and said:

"Let's put her off the team altogether."

"We can't do it," objected Laura.

"Ask Mrs. Case to do it, then," said Jess.

"But who'll ask her? Hester will be awfully mad," said Eve Sitz.

"I wouldn't want to be the one to do the asking," admitted the bold Bobby.

The seven regular members of the basketball team were alone now. Dorothy Lockwood said:

"I wouldn't want to be the one to sign a petition. But that is what we ought to do—sign a petition to Mrs. Case asking her to remove Hester."

"What do you say, Mother Wit?" demanded Jess Morse of Laura.

"I vote for the petition," said Laura, gravely.

"And who'll sign it?" cried Dorothy.

"All of us."

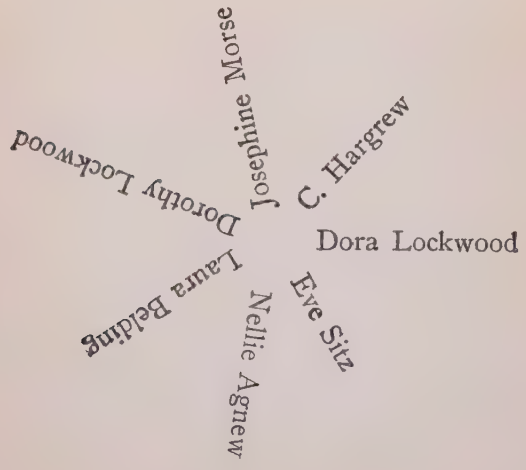
"Not me first!" declared Dora.

"We'll make it a 'round robin,'" said Laura, smiling. "All seven of us will sign in a circle, but nobody need take the lead in making the request. If we are all agreed Jess can write the petition to Mrs. Case."

"I'll do it!" declared Jess Morse.

With some corrections from her chum, Josephine finally prepared and presented for their signatures the petition, and having read it the girls, one after the other, signed her name in the manner Mother Wit had suggested. The petition and Round Robin was as follows:

"We, the undersigned members of Basketball Team No. 1, of Central High, Girls' Branch Athletic League, after due and ample discussion of the facts, conclude that the retention of Hester Grimes as a member of the said team is a detriment thereto, and that her membership will, in the future, as in the past, cause the team to lose games in the Trophy Series of Inter-School Games. We therefore ask that the aforesaid Hester Grimes be removed from the team and that some other player be nominated in her stead."



In signing the paper in this fashion no one girl could be accused of leading in the demand for Hester's removal. Lily had gone, so that nobody would tell Hester just what each girl said, or who signed first. That Nellie Agnew had taken the lead in this petition against her schoolmate the doctor's daughter herself knew, if nobody else did. She felt a little conscience-stricken over it, too, for she had told Daddy Doctor that she would be guided by his advice in the matter of Hester Grimes.

And after supper that night her father said something that made Nellie feel more than ever condemned.

"Do you know, Nell," he said, thoughtfully, pulling on his old black pipe as she perched as usual on the broad arm of his chair. "Do you know there is good stuff in that girl Hester?"

"In Hester Grimes?" asked Nellie, rather flutteringly.

"Yes. In Hester Grimes. I guess you didn't hear about it. And it slipped my mind. But when I was over to see little Johnny Doyle again to-day I found Hester there and the Doyles think she's about right—especially Rufus."

"Rufus isn't just right in his mind—is he?" asked Nellie, her eyes twinkling a little.

"I don't know. In some things Rufe is 'way

above the average," chuckled her father. "He is cunning enough, sure enough! But to get back to Hester. I never told you how she jumped into the sewer-basin and saved Johnny's life?"

"No! Never!" gasped Nellie.

The physician told her the incident in full. He told her further that Hester had done a deal, off and on, for the Widow Doyle and her children.

"Oh, I wish I had known!" cried Nellie, in real contrition.

"What for?" demanded the doctor.

But she would not tell him. She knew that the petition had been mailed to Mrs. Case that very evening. Her name was on it, and in her own heart Nellie knew that she had had as much to do with the scheme to put Hester Grimes off the basketball team as any girl.

"Perhaps, if the girls had known what Hester did for Johnny they wouldn't have been so bitter against her," thought the doctor's daughter. "I know *I* would never have signed that hateful paper. Oh, dear! why did Daddy Doctor have to find out that there was some good in Hester, and tell *me* about it?"

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER RAID

HESTER GRIMES, as the doctor said, had appeared late that afternoon at the Doyles' little tenement. She had gone there from the basketball game instead of going directly home.

To tell the truth, she did not wish to be questioned by her mother, nor did she want to meet Lily. If she had felt hatred against her mates in Central High before, that feeling in her heart was now doubled!

For, as all anger is illogical (indignation may not be) Hester turned upon the girls and blamed them for the referee's decision. Because Miss Lawrence had put her out of the game Hester would have been glad to know that her team mates had gone to pieces and been defeated.

She had managed to recover outwardly from her disappointment and anger, however, when she arrived at the domicile of her humble acquaintances. Mrs. Doyle knitted jackets, and Hester had ordered one for her mother.

"Ma is always lolling around and complaining of feeling draughts," said Hester. "So I'll give her one of these 'snuggers' to keep her shoulders warm. She's always snuffing with a cold when it comes fall and the furnace fire is not lit."

"Lots o' folks are having colds just now," complained Mrs. Doyle. "Johnny's snuffling with one."

"Oh, he'll be all right—won't he, Rufie?" said Hester, chucking the baby under his plump little chin, but speaking to his faithful nurse.

"In course he will, Miss Hester," cried Rufus, and then opened his mouth for a roar of laughter, that made even the feverish Johnny crow.

"Rufus never gets tired of minding Johnny," said the widow, proudly. "But he does miss his Uncle Bill."

Rufe's face clouded over. "He ain't never home no more," he said, complainingly.

"But you can go over to see him at the gymnasium," said Hester.

"Not no more he can't, Miss," said the widow. "Rufus used to go over to see Uncle Bill evenings; but Uncle Bill can't have him there no more."

"Why not?" asked Hester, quickly; and yet she flushed and turned her own gaze away and looked out of the window.

"Bill's had some trouble there. He's afraid the Board of Education would object. Somebody got into the building——"

"I heard about it," said Hester, quickly.

"Wisht Uncle Bill had another job," grumbled Rufus.

"Rufie's real bright about some things," whispered his mother. "And sharp ain't no name for it! He is pretty cute. You can't say much before him that he don't remember, and repeat."

"Wisht that old gymnasium building would burn up; then Uncle Bill could come home," muttered Rufe.

Mrs. Doyle went to see to her fire. Hester beckoned the boy to the window and whispered to him. Gradually Rufe's face lit up with one of his flashes of cunning. Money passed from the girl's hand to that of the half-witted youth.

Just then Dr. Agnew appeared and Hester took her departure.

On the following morning Franklin Sharp, the principal of Central High, called a conference of his teachers at the first opportunity. He was very grave indeed when he told them that another raid had been made upon the girls' gymnasium.

"Not so much damage is reported as was done before. But, then, the paraphernalia before destroyed was not all removed. But this time the scoundrel—or scoundrels—tried arson.

"A fire was built in a closet on the upper floor. Bill Jackway smelled smoke and got up to see what it was. He found no trace of the firebug —can discover no way in which he got out——"

"But how did he get in?" asked one of the teachers.

"That is plain. It had rained early in the evening. Footprints are still visible leading across a soft piece of ground from the east fence to a window. The window was open, although Bill swears it was shut and locked when he went to bed at ten o'clock. That is how the marauder entered the building. How he got out is a mystery," declared the principal.

"It is a very dreadful thing," complained Miss Carrington. "I do not see what we can do about it."

"We must do something," said Miss Gould, with vigor.

"Suppose you suggest a course of procedure, Miss Gould?" said the principal, his eyes twinkling.

"I think it would be well," said Miss Gould, "to sift every rumor and story regarding this matter. There is much gossip among the girls. I have heard of a threat that one girl made in the gymnasium——"

"That is quite ridiculous, Miss Gould!" cried Miss Carrington, with some heat. "You have

been listening to a base slander against one of my very best pupils."

"You mean this Hester Grimes, Henry Grimes's daughter?" said the principal, sternly.

"That is the girl," admitted Miss Gould. "I know little about her——"

"And I know a good deal," interposed Mrs. Case, grimly. "Miss Carrington finds her good at her books, and her deportment is always fair in classes. I find her the hardest girl to manage in all the school. She has a bad temper and she has never been taught to control it. It has gone so far that I fear I shall have to shut her out of some of the athletics," and she related all that had happened at the basketball game with the East High girls the afternoon before.

"I do not approve of these contests," said Miss Carrington, primly. "They are sure to cause quarreling."

"If they do, then there is something the matter with the girls," declared Mr. Sharp, briskly.

"And I have received this request from the girls of the team—seven of them—this morning," continued Mrs. Case, producing the "round robin." "The only girls beside Hester who did not sign it is a girl who always chums with her —the only really close friend Hester has to my knowledge in the school.

"Now, I should like very much to be instructed what to do about this? The girls are perfectly in the right. Hester is not dependable on the team. There should be another girl in her place——"

"Oh, but it is quite unfair!" cried Miss Carrington. "And remember her father is quite an important man. There will be trouble if Hester is put down in these tiresome athletics; or if this story that is going about is repeated to Mr. Grimes I can't imagine what he *would* do."

"Mr. Grimes does not run the Board of Education, nor does he control *our* actions," declared Mr. Sharp. "We must take cognizance of these matters at once. I believe you should remove Hester from the team, as requested, Mrs. Case. You have ample reason for so doing. And this matter of the attempt to burn the gymnasium must be investigated fully."

"But no girl could do these things in the gymnasium," cried Miss Carrington, with considerable asperity.

"But she could get somebody else to do them —especially a girl who is allowed as much spending money as Hester Grimes," said the principal. "I can imagine no sane person committing such a crime. It is wilful and malicious mischief, and could only be inspired by hatred, or —an unbalanced mind. That is my opinion."

CHAPTER X

MOTHER WIT AND THE GRAY MARE

For some reason, that lively young "female Mercury," as Jess Morse sometimes dubbed her, Bobby Hargrew, did not hear of this new raid upon the girls' gym. early that morning; so, like the other pupils of Central High, she could not visit the athletic building until after school. She went then with Nellie and Laura and Jess, and the quartette were almost the first girls to enter the building that day.

"It's a dreadful thing," said Laura, in discussing the affair.

The girls were all noticeably grave about the matter this time. There was little excitement, or talk of "how horrid it was" and all that. There was a gravity in their manner which showed that the girls of Central High were quite aware that the case was serious in the extreme.

One of their number was accused of being the instigator of these raids on the gymnasium. True, or false, it was an accusation that could not be lightly overlooked. Laura Belding was

particularly grave; and Nellie Agnew had cried about it.

The four friends went out into the field and examined the footprints in the earth.

"Those were never Hessie's 'feetprints,' for, big as her feet are, she never wears boots like *those!*" giggled Bobby.

"He was a shuffler—that fellow," said Jess. "See how blurred the marks are at the heel?"

"And he shuffled right up to this window—And how do you suppose he opened it, if, as Mr. Jackway says, it was locked on the inside?"

"Mystery!" said Bobby.

"Give it up," added Jess. "What do you say, Mother Wit?"

"That is the way he opened it," said Laura, softly, looking up from the foot prints.

"What's that?" cried Jess.

"Why—I hear you talking, but you don't say anything!" laughed Bobby. "*How* did he open it?"

"From the inside," said Laura.

"Why, Laura!" gasped Nellie. "You do not distrust Mr. Jackway?"

"Hush! Of course not," cried Jess, in a lower tone.

"No, I do not distrust him," said Laura Belding.

"What do you mean, then, by saying that the

fellow opened the window from the inside?"

"And that's ridiculous, Laura!" cried Jess. "He walked up to the window from across the field—you can see he did. And there's no mark showing how he went away. He did not leave by the window. He could not have been inside when he came from outside——"

"Hold on! Hold on!" warned Bobby. "You're getting dreadfully mixed, Jess."

"But I don't see what Laura's driving at," declared her chum.

"Why," said Mother Wit, calmly, "the person who made those shoe prints walked backwards. Don't you see? That is what makes the shuffling mark at the heel. And see! the step is so uneven in length. He escaped by the window; he didn't enter by it."

"Well!" cried Nellie Agnew. "That explains without explaining. The mystery is deeper than ever."

"Why is it?" demanded Jess.

"Don't you see? Before, we thought we knew how the fellow got in. It seems to be an easier thing to get out of the gym. than into it. But now Laura knocks that in the head. The mystery is: How did he get in?"

"Oh, don't!" cried Bobby. "It makes my head buzz. And Laura is a regular lady detec-

tive. She's always finding out things that 'it would be better, far, did we not know!'"

She said this to Nellie Agnew, when they had separated from Laura and Jess, and were walking toward home.

"Say! do you know how Laura explained that canoe tipping over with Purt Sweet and Lily Pendleton?" pursued the lively one.

"I didn't know that they had an accident," laughed Nellie. "Those canoes are awfully ticklish, I know."

"I should say they were! Well, Purt and Lil borrowed Hessie's canoe and they no more than got started before they went head first into the water—and Lil, of course, helpless as usual, had to be 'rescued.' The number of times that girl has been 'rescued' this season is a caution!"

"I do admire your elegant language," said Nellie, reprovingly. "But what did Laura say?"

"She explained it all for them. Both Purt and Lil were trying to tell how such a wonderful thing chanced to happen as an overturn, when Laura said she could explain it satisfactorily to all hands. She said that Purt had made a mistake and parted his hair too far on one side, and that had overbalanced the canoe!"

"Well, they do swamp awfully easy," laughed

Nellie. "I guess Laura has found the right explanation of how the villain left the gym. But there is one explanation that I would like to have—a much more important one," concluded Nellie.

"What's that?"

"*Who* did it?"

"I thought that was pretty well understood," growled Bobby.

"No girl could have climbed over that fence, that's sure!"

"Oh, I grant you that!" cried Bobby. "But she paid to have it done. There are plenty of tough fellows from down at the 'Four Corners' who work at the slaughter house. They could be hired to do it."

"Hush, Bobby!" commanded the doctor's daughter. "I feel terribly condemned. I am afraid we are accusing Hester wrongfully. A girl couldn't have two such very opposite sides to her character," and she promptly told her friend what Dr. Agnew had related regarding Hester's rescue of little Johnny Doyle from the sewer basin.

"Gee! that was some jump, wasn't it?" demanded the admiring Bobby. Then she shook her head slowly. "Well," she remarked, "nobody ever said Hester wasn't brave enough. She

was brave enough to slap your face!" and then she giggled.

"I don't care," said Nellie, slowly. "I fear we went too far when we asked Mrs. Case to take her off the team. And I'm *sure* it isn't right for us to accuse her of being the cause of the trouble at the gym.—without further and better evidence."

"Oh, dear, Nell! you're a great fuss-budget!" cried the effervescent Bobby. "Are you sure that your Daddy Doctor saw quite straight when he saw Hester save the kid. You know, he's getting awfully absent-minded."

Nellie smiled at her, taking Bobby's jokes good naturedly.

"I know father is absent-minded," she admitted. "But not as bad as all that."

"I don't know," returned Bobby, with apparent seriousness. "The other day when he put the stethoscope to me before practice, I expected to see him take the receiver away from his ear and holler 'Hello, Central!' into it."

"I'll tell him that!" promised Nellie.

"All right. Do your worst," giggled Bobby. "It will be a month old before he gets around to sound my heart action again, and he will have forgotten all about by then."

The Saturday following a crowd of the girls

went out to visit Eve Sitz, and Nellie and Bobby were included in the automobile load that left the Beldings' house right after luncheon. Saturday mornings Laura always helped in her father's jewelry store, while Chet was behind the counter as an extra salesman in the evening; so the Beldings' chauffeur drove the car to the Sitz farm for the girls.

There were chestnut and hickory woods on, and near, the Sitz farm, and the girls had in mind a scheme for a big nutting party just as soon as Otto Sitz—Eve's brother—should pronounce the frost heavy enough to open the chestnut burrs and send the hickory nuts tumbling to the ground.

There was always plenty to do to amuse the young folk—especially young folk from the city—on the Sitz place. This day Otto and the hired men were husking corn on the barn floor, and Nellie, and Bobby, and Jess and the Lockwood twins were supplied with "corn pegs" and sat around the pile, helping to strip the golden and red ears.

Eve had an errand down at the nearest country store, so she put the old gray mare into the spring cart with her own hands, and Laura rode with her.

"We had a nice colt from old Peggy last year, and two weeks ago it was stolen. Otto had just

broken her to saddle, and she was a likely animal," Eve said. "Old Peggy misses her, and whinnies for her all the time," she added, as the mare raised her head and sent a clarion call echoing across the hills.

"Hasn't your father tried to find the thief—or the colt?" queried Laura.

"Yes, indeed. He's over to Keyport to-day to see the detective there."

"But the colt may be outside the county," urged Laura.

"That's so, too. We haven't any idea where Jinks went. That was her name—Jinksey. She doesn't look much like Old Peggy; but she was worth a hundred and fifty dollars, if she was worth a cent! More than father could easily afford to lose. And then—Otto really owned her—or would have owned her when he came of age. Father had promised Jinks to him."

"It's a shame!" cried Laura, always sympathetic. "And you have no suspicion as to who could have taken her?"

"No. Down beyond the store—beyond Robinson's Woods, you know—there is a settlement of people who have a hard name. They rob the gardens and orchards on the edge of town——"

"Toward Centerport, you mean?"

"Yes."

"The Four Corners' crowd!" cried Laura.

"Yes."

"Oh, that gang are a bad lot. Once Chet and I motored through there and an ugly fellow named Pocock came out and fired a charge of bird-shot into a rear tire. He said an auto had been through there the week before and killed his pig, and he was going to shoot at every machine he saw. We've never taken that road again."

"That Hebe Pocock is an awfully bad fellow," said Eve, seriously. "He tried to work for us once, but father wouldn't keep him more than a day. And he's been mad at us ever since."

"Maybe some of those fellows in that gang stole your Jinksey."

"How are we going to know? Father or Otto wouldn't dare go down there and look around. And I guess the police are afraid of those fellows, too."

"Let's drive down past the store," suggested Laura, thoughtfully, after the old mare had again lifted up her voice.

"Oh, my, Laura! What for?"

"Something might come of it."

"I guess nothing but trouble."

"I've got what Chet and Lance call 'a hunch,'" said Laura, slowly.

"We—ell——here's the store."

"Just a little farther, Eve," said Laura, taking the reins herself, and clucking to the old mare.

They passed the store on the trot. Around the first bend they came in sight of the little hollow where the roads crossed, making the renowned "Four Corners." Coming up the road was a boy on a bay colt. Instantly the old mare whinnied again, and the colt answered her.

"It's Jinksey!" gasped Eve.

"We're going to get her—if you're sure!" declared Laura.

"Of course I'm sure. I'd know her anywhere —and so would Old Peggy."

The colt snorted again, and the boy riding her tried to pull her out into a side path, to cut across the fields. Eve stood up and shouted to him. Laura urged the gray mare on, and she went down the hill at a tearing pace.

CHAPTER XI

HEBE POCOCK

"Oh, Laura!" gasped Eve. "That boy will never give the colt up."

"Why not? See him?" exclaimed Mother Wit. "He knows he is riding a stolen horse. There! he's sliding out of the saddle."

The fact was, the colt—still but half broken under the saddle and with its eyes on its mother—would not move out of its tracks. The boy jumped off and tried to lead Jinks.

"Get away from that horse, boy!" commanded Laura, bringing the old mare down to a more moderate pace as they approached the stolen colt.

"I'll tell my brother!" yelled the youngster. "I'll set him on ye! This critter is his'n."

"And he came by it just as dishonestly as you came by such grammar as you use," said Laura, laughing, while Eve hopped over the wheel on her side of the cart and grabbed the reins out of the boy's hands.

"Let that horse alone!" cried the youngster, kicking at Eve with his bare foot.

But Eve Sitz wasn't afraid of any boy—not even had he been of her own size and age. Her open palm smacked the youngster's head resoundingly and he staggered away, bawling:

"Lemme erlone! Hebe! Hebron Pocock! I wantcher!"

Laura was already backing the mare, preparatory to turning about.

"Come on with the colt, Eve!" she cried.

The boy they had unhorsed continued to bawl at the top of his voice. But for the moment nobody appeared. Eve lengthened the bridle rein for a leading strap and then essayed to climb into the cart again. The boy ceased crying and threw a stone. The colt jumped and tried to pull away, for the stone struck her.

"Whoa, Jinks!" cried Eve. "If I could catch that boy! I'd do more than box his ears—so I would!"

"Come on, Eve!" called Laura, looking over her shoulder. "Here come some women from the shanties. They will do something to us beside calling us names——or throwing stones," as she dodged one that the boy sent in her direction.

"Whoa, Jinksey!" commanded Eve, again trying to lead the frightened colt toward the cart.

"Hebe Pocock! Yi-yi! You're wanted!"

yelled the small boy again, sending down a perfect shower of stones from the bank above them, but fortunately throwing them wild.

Eve managed to climb up into the cart, still holding the snorting, pawing colt by the strap.

"Drive on! drive on!" she gasped, looking back at the several ill-looking and worse dressed women who were running toward them.

"Go on!" urged Laura to the mare, and Old Peggy started back up the hill, while Eve towed Jinks behind. Suddenly, however, the bushes parted, and a roughly dressed fellow, with a red handkerchief tied around his head in lieu of a cap, stepped out into the road. He carried a gun in the hollow of his arm, the muzzle of which was turned threateningly toward the cart and the two girls in it. The two barrels looked as big around as cannon in the eyes of Laura and Evangeline Sitz!

"Hey, there!" advised the ugly looking fellow. "You ladies better stop a bit."

"It's Pocock!" whispered Laura.

"I know it," returned Eve, in the same tone.

"That horse you're leadin' belongs to me," said Pocock, with an ugly scowl.

"You know better, Hebron," exclaimed Eve, bravely. "It belongs to my father."

"It may look like your father's colt," said

Pocock. "But I bought her of a gypsy, and it ain't the same an—i—mile."

"The old mare knows her," said Laura, quickly, as the colt nuzzled up to Peggy and the gray mare turned around to look upon the colt with favorable eye.

"That don't prove nothing," growled Pocock. "Drop that rein."

"No, I won't!" cried Eve. "Even the bridle is father's. I recognize it."

By this time the women from the shanties had arrived. They were dreadful looking creatures, and Laura was more afraid of them than she was of Pocock's shot-gun.

"What's them gals doin' to your brother Mike, Hebe?" demanded one of the women. "They want slappin', don't they?"

"They want to l'arn to keep their han's off'n my property," growled Pocock. "Come! let the little horse go."

"No!" cried Eve.

"Yes," cried Pocock, shifting his gun threateningly.

"You bet she will!" cried the woman who had spoken before, and she started to climb up on Laura's side of the cart.

Laura seized the whip and the woman jumped back.

"Shoot her, Hebe!" she yelled. "She'd a struck me with that thing!"

But Laura had no such intention. She brought the lash of the whip down upon the mare's flank. With a snort of surprise and pain the old horse sprang forward and had not Hebe Pocock leaped quickly aside he would have been run over.

But unfortunately neither Eve nor the colt were prepared for this sudden move on Laura's part. The colt stood stock-still and Eve lost her grip on the bridle rein.

"Go it!" yelled Pocock, laughing with delight. "I got the colt!"

He sprang at the head of Jinks. The women were laughing and shrieking.

"That's the time I did it!" gasped Laura, in chagrin, pulling down the old mare.

And just then the purring of an automobile sounded in their ears and there rounded the nearest turn in the road a big touring car. It rolled down toward the cart and the group about the colt, with diminished speed.

"Oh! we mustn't lose that colt after coming so near getting it away," cried Laura.

"But father can go after it with a constable," declared Eve, doubtfully.

"But Pocock will get it away from here——"

"Why, Laura Belding!" exclaimed a loud,

good-natured voice. "What is the matter here?"

"Mrs. Grimes!" gasped Laura, as the auto stopped. The butcher's wife and daughter were sitting in the tonneau. Hester looked straight ahead and did not even glance at her two schoolfellows.

"Isn't that young Pocock, that used to work for your father, Hester?" demanded Mrs. Grimes. "That's a very bad boy. What's he been doing to you, Laura?"

"He has stolen that little horse from Eve's father," cried Laura. "And now he won't give it up."

"'Tain't so!" cried Hebe Pocock, loudly. "Don't you believe that gal, Mis' Grimes. I bought this horse——"

"Hebe," said the butcher's wife, calmly, "you never had money enough in your life to buy a horse like that—and you never will have. Lead it up here and let the girl have her father's property. And you women, go back to your homes—and clean up, for mercy's sake! I never did see such a shiftless, useless lot as you are at the Four Corners. When I lived there, we had some decency about us——"

"Oh, Mother!" gasped Hester, grasping the good lady's arm.

"Well, that's where we lived—your father an' me," declared Mrs. Grimes. "It was near the slaughter houses and handy for him. And let me tell you, there was respectable folk lived there in them days. Hebe Pocock! Are you goin' to do what I tell you?"

The fellow came along in a very hang-dog manner and passed the strap to Eve Sitz.

"'Tain't fair. It's my horse," he growled.

"You know better," said Mrs. Grimes, calmly. "And you expect Mr. Grimes to find you a good job, do you? You wanted to get to be watchman, or the like, in town? If I tell Henry about this what chance do you suppose you'll ever have at *that* job?"

"Mebbe I'll get it, anyway," grinned Pocock.

"And maybe you won't," said Mrs. Grimes, calmly.

Meanwhile Laura and Eve, after thanking the butcher's wife, drove on. But Hester never looked at them, or spoke.

CHAPTER XII

"OUT OF IT"

FOR on that Saturday morning Mrs. Case had called at the Grimes house and asked to see Hester. The girl came down and, the moment she saw the physical instructor of Central High, seemed to know what was afoot.

"So you've come to tell me I'm not on the team any more, I s'pose, Mrs. Case?" she demanded, tossing her head, her face growing very red.

"I am sorry to tell you that, after your actions at the game with East High Wednesday afternoon, it has been decided that another girl nominated to your position on Team Number 1 would probably do better," said Mrs. Case, quietly.

"Well!" snapped Hester. "You've been wanting to get me off ever since last spring——"

"Hester! although we are not at school now, we are discussing school matters, and I am one of your teachers. Just as long as you attend

Central High you must speak respectfully to and of your instructors, both in and out of school. Do you wish me to report your language to Mr. Sharp?"

Hester was sullenly silent for a moment.

"For I can assure you," continued Mrs. Case, "that if I were to place the entire matter before him, including your general deportment at the gymnasium and on the athletic field, I feel sure your parents would be requested to remove you from the school. Do you understand that?"

"I don't know that I would be very sorry," muttered the girl.

"You think you would not," said Mrs. Case; "but it is not so. You are too old to be taken out of one school and put in another because of your deportment. Wherever you went that fact would follow you. It would be hard work for you to live down such a reputation, Hester."

"I wish father would send me to a boarding-school, anyway."

"And I doubt if that would help you any. You will not be advised, Hester. But you will learn yet that I speak the truth when I tell you that you will be neither happy, nor popular, wherever you go, unless you control your temper."

"What do I care about those nasty girls on the Hill?" sputtered the butcher's daughter.

"They're a lot of nobodies, if they *are* so stuck-up."

"There is not a girl in your class, Hester, who puts on airs over you—or who attempts to," said Mrs. Case, warmly. "And you know that is so. Deep in your heart, Hester, you know just where the trouble lies. Your lack of self-control and your envy are at the root of all your troubles in school and in athletics.

Hester only pouted; but she made no reply.

"Now I am forced to remove you from this team where—if you would keep your temper—you could be of much use. You are a good player at basketball—one of the best in Central High. And we have to deny you the privilege of playing on the champion team because——"

"Just because the other girls don't want me to play with them!" cried the girl, angrily.

"And can they be blamed?" demanded the teacher, quite exasperated herself now. "If you had any loyalty to Central High you would not have acted as you did."

"I don't care!" flashed out Hester.

At that Mrs. Case arose to go. "You are hopeless," she said, decisively. "I had it in mind to offer you a chance to win back your position on the team. But such consideration would be thrown away on you."

"I don't want to play with the horrid, stuck-

up things!" cried Hester, quite beside herself now with rage and mortification. "I hate them all. I don't want any of them to be my friends. And as for your old athletics—I'm going to tell father that they're no good and that I want to withdraw from the League."

"You may be saved the necessity for that if you haven't a care, Hester," warned Mrs. Case, taking her departure.

It was because of this visit from the physical instructor, perhaps, that Hester fairly bullied her father at luncheon time into allowing her mother and herself to try out an automobile that an agent had wanted to sell the wholesale butcher for some time. If automobiles had been uncommon on the Hill Henry Grimes would have had one long before for his family, for he loved display, just as Hester did. But nearly every family at their end of Whiffle Street had a car.

However, Mrs. Grimes woke up enough to show interest in the matter, too, for she really liked riding in a car that ran smoothly and rapidly over the macadamized roads about Centerport; so she added her complaint to Hester's and finally the butcher telephoned for the car to be sent up. But he would not give any time to it himself. Therefore it was that Hester and her mother appeared on the Hill road just above the Four Corners in season to extricate Laura Beld-

ing and Eve Sitz from their very uncomfortable session with Hebe Pocock and his crowd.

"We ought to have gone along and left those girls to get out of it as best they could," snapped Hester, when the car rolled on and Laura and Eve, with the mare and colt, were out of sight.

"Why, I declare for't!" ejaculated Mrs. Grimes. "You certainly do hate that Belding girl—and I don't see a living thing the matter with her. She's smart an' bright—remember how she found my auto veil that you lost last spring?"

Hester had very good reason for remembering that occasion. She had always been afraid that Laura would circulate the story connected with that veil; and because Laura had kept silence Hester hated her all the more.

And now Hester allowed bitter thoughts against Mother Wit and the other members of the basketball team to fester in her mind, until she was actually insanely angry with and jealous of them.

When her mother that evening at dinner told Mr. Grimes about the actions of Hebron Pocock, who sometimes worked for the butcher at the slaughtering plant near the Four Corners, Hester tried to smooth the matter over and suggest that Hebe was "only in fun" and was just scaring two silly girls.

"Well, I suggested him for watchman at the gymnasium," said Mr. Grimes. "But he isn't likely to get it. The Board has every confidence in this Bill Jackway, despite the fact that somebody seems to get into the gym. and damage things without his knowing how they do it. Bill is an easy-going fellow. That's why I suggested Hebe Pocock. If Hebe was on the job, he'd eat a fellow up who tried to monkey around the gym."

Hester was silent thereafter until the subject of conversation was changed.

The following week she found herself "out of it" with a vengeance. If Lily Pendleton had been absenting herself from Hester's side more than usual since the fall term opened, now she was still more away. Lily did not wish to lose her membership in the basketball team. To be a member of the champion nine of Central High gave her a certain prestige that that young lady did not wish to lose.

Besides, Lily was one of the largest girls in the Junior class, was vigorous physically, and loved the game. So Hester was thrown back upon her own resources more than ever. And her own company did not please Miss Hester Grimes.

She could, of course, have found associates among some of the younger girls, or among

those who are always willing to play the courtier to a girl who spends her money freely. Yet there were few of these latter at Central High, and not many of the younger girls—the sophs and freshies—liked Hester well enough to chum with her.

And now that the whispered accusations against the wholesale butcher's daughter had gone about the school regarding the gymnasium mystery, many girls looked askance at Hester when she passed by, and some even ignored her and refused to speak to her.

Ordinarily this would have troubled her but little. She was often "not on speaking terms" with dozens of girls—especially with those of her own class. But this was different, and she began to notice it. Girls who had heretofore nodded to her on the street or in the yard of the school, at least, walked right by and did not turn their eyes upon her.

Furthermore, when Hester approached a group of her classmates they often hushed their animated discussions and broke up the group quickly. They were speaking of her. She could not imagine what they said, but her heart burned with anger against them.

Hester kept away from the gym. She told herself she did not care what happened to the "old place." She hated it. She would not go

there and see another girl practice in her place on the basketball team.

A game with the West High girls was scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. It was not until after that that her mother learned that she no longer played on the Central High team. And Mrs. Grimes wanted to know *why*.

"Never you mind!" snapped Hester, who was not above being saucy to her mother at times. "It doesn't concern you."

"Don't you *want* to play any more?" insisted Mrs. Grimes.

"No, I don't! Now, that's finished!" cried Hester, and flounced out of the room.

Her father had agreed to buy the new auto, and she telephoned for the man at the garage to bring it up. Nobody ever crossed Hester, if he could help it, and when she said to the man that she wanted to learn to run the car he supposed that her father was willing.

He did not ask her age, although the Centerport Board of Aldermen had established a rule that no person under sixteen should be given a license or be allowed to run a motor car. At any rate, he did not expect to be requested to let her run the car without his guidance.

But this is exactly what Hester demanded when they were out of town. It was a warm, smoky fall day. There were brush fires some-

where over the ridge to the south of Centerport; or else some spark from a railroad locomotive had set the leaves in the ditches afire. It had been dry for a week and the woods were like tinder.

They had run far out the road past the entrance to Robinson's Picnic Grounds, and there Hester demanded to manage the car alone, while the man sat in back.

"You make me nervous!" she exclaimed. "I'll never learn anything with you nudging my elbow all the time. There! get along with you."

She really was a very capable girl, and she was not unfamiliar with motor cars; but the chauffeur doubted.

"I don't believe I can do it, Miss," he said. "I'll sit here——"

Suddenly the car stopped. The engine was still running, but the car did not move.

"*Now* what's the matter?" snapped Hester. "Hop out and see, Joseph."

The man did so and immediately she turned the switch again and the machine darted ahead, leaving the chauffeur in the middle of the road.

"I'll be back after a little!" she called to him, coolly, over her shoulder, and the next moment rounded a turn safely and shut the amazed and angry chauffeur out of view.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WIND VEERS

THE car purred along so easily and it was such a delight to manage the wheel without the interference of the chauffeur that Hester did not note the distance she traveled. Nor was she at first aware of the speed. Then she suddenly realized that she had shifted the gear to the highest speed forward, and that a picket fence she passed was merely a blur along the roadside.

But this was a road on which there were few houses, and most of them were back in the fields, in the middle of the farms that bordered the pike.

"This will never do," thought Hester, and she began to manipulate the levers and finally brought the car to a stop. The roadway was narrow and she would have to back to turn. But this was one of the very things she desired to learn how to do; and that officious Joseph was always fussing when he was beside her.

"How many miles have I come, I wonder?" she asked herself, looking about.

She was on a ridge of land overlooking a narrow valley. At the end of the valley the road seemed to dip from the ridge, and it disappeared in a thick haze of blue smoke.

"The fire must be over that way," she thought. "Shall I run that far and see what it means? The wind is not blowing toward me."

She started the car once more. The auto rolled on, but she noticed that it wasn't firing regularly.

"Hullo! Is it going to kick up rusty now and here?" muttered Hester, and she stopped. Having learned that much, she opened the carburetor to see if the gasoline was flowing all right. Then she tried a dozen times to start the car, without success. Suddenly she stood up with a jerk. In the distance she heard a growing roar—the oncoming rush of a powerful car.

Fortunately she had stopped on the side of the road. There was room for another car to pass. And out of the blue smoke ahead it appeared with startling suddenness, hurled like a missile from a gun directly up the road toward her.

She knew the car almost instantly. It was the Beldings' auto and it was crowded with young folk. She knew where they had been. The next week the girls of Central High had been invited

to Keyport to play the first team at basketball of the High School in that town.

Hester had heard all about the game the day before with the West High girls. With Roberta Fish in Hester's old position at forward center, the girls of Central High had swept all before them. They had beaten their opponents with a good lead. Of course, the West High team was not as strong as the East High had been; but Roberta had done well and victory had, for the first time in months, perched upon the banner of Central High.

A committee had been appointed to go over and see the Keyport managers, and now it was returning. The big car was driven by Chet Belding, with Launcelot Darby beside him. Laura, Jess, Bobby, Nellie, and the Lockwood twins filled the tonneau comfortably.

Hester hoped that the Belding car would wheel right by and that her school fellows would not notice her. But Chet saw the car stalled, and Laura's quick eye detected the lone girl standing with her back to them, looking off across the valley.

"What's the matter with that girl and her car?" demanded Lance, as Chet slowed down.

"It's Hester. Mr. Grimes has bought a car at last, I understand," said Laura, leaning over

the back of the seat and speaking to the boys. "Is she in trouble, do you think?"

"I'll bet she is!" exclaimed Lance.

"And out on this road alone. Where's the chauffeur?" said Chet.

"And if the wind should change!" cried Nellie Agnew.

"By Jove, that's so!" ejaculated Chet, bringing his car to a full stop right beside the stalled auto.

"Hullo, Miss Grimes!" he sang out. "Can we help you? What's the matter with your car?"

Hester saw it was useless to refuse to see them then. Besides, she did not want to be stalled there for hours.

"That's what I've been trying to find out," she said, pointedly speaking to the boy, not to the girls.

"Great machines," drawled Lance. "When you think you know all about 'em they kick up and give you a lot of trouble. Isn't that so, Chet?"

Chet was getting from under the wheel, and grunted. But Laura hopped out before him, came to Hester's side of the car, and asked:

"Did it stop of itself?"

"No. It wasn't firing regularly. I looked at

the carburetor to see if it was all right. Then I tried to start her and couldn't," said Hester, ungraciously.

Laura was going over the wiring to see if there were no loose contacts before Chet came to them. She turned the fly wheel far enough to get the buzz of the spark coils.

"Go ahead, Sis!" chuckled Chet. "You know so much you'll be taking our old mill to pieces pretty soon, I reckon."

Hester stood by and bit her lip with vexation. She was almost on the point of driving Laura away from the car, rather than have her enemy —for so she considered Mother Wit—help her out of her trouble. But night was coming on and she did not want to stand there much longer, if the car could be started.

Laura removed a plug, grounded it on a cylinder and turned the wheel to a sparking point to note the quality of the spark and the strength of the battery. Then she ticked the carburetor and opened the small cock at the bottom.

"You're getting your gloves all messy, Laura!" called Jess from the other car.

"Hush!" commanded Chet, grinning, and holding up his hand. "Do not disturb the priestess of automobiling at her devotions. There will be something 'didding' in a minute—now watch."

But Laura was serious—and interested. She closed the cock and felt along the gasoline pipe to the valve rod. This seemed to interest her particularly. In a moment she straightened up and stood back, saying to Hester:

"You try the engine. Maybe she'll work now."

Hester scrambled into her seat and tried the starter. The engine began to buzz like a sawmill.

"Great Scott, Laura!" cried her brother. "What did you do to it?"

"Turned on the gasoline," said his sister, drily. "When Hester looked at her carburetor she turned it off. No wonder the engine wouldn't run."

"Thanks," muttered Hester, in a choked tone, while the crowd in the other auto smothered their laughter, and she prepared to start the car when Chet should have stepped aside.

"Hold on!" said young Belding. "This isn't any way to be traveling, Miss Hester."

"Why not?" she snapped at him, for the situation was getting on her nerves now.

"The wind is likely to change. If it veers around it will drive the fire directly up this road," said Chet.

"What's burning?" demanded the girl, sharply.

"The whole forest back yonder through the cut. We came through a big cloud of smoke."

"If you got through I guess I can," Hester said, ungratefully, and the next moment started her car, which rolled swiftly away along the turnpike.

The fact was, she did not want to try to turn the machine while they were watching her. She knew she should be awkward about it. And Laura Belding had displayed her superiority over her once already—and that was enough!

The big car purred again joyously, and the roadway slipped behind like a ribbon running over a spool. In half a minute Hester and her car had dipped into the valley and were running through the cut between the hills. The Belding car was out of sight.

But suddenly she became aware that the smoke was thick here. This deep cut was filled with it. And the fumes were not only choking; there was heat with the smoke.

A shift of wind drove a thick cloud out of the forest and she had to shut her eyes. This was dangerous work. She knew better than to try to run the car on high speed when she could not see twenty feet beyond it..

When she reduced speed she was cognizant of a roaring sound from the forest. For a moment she thought a big wind was coming.

Then she knew better. It was the fire. Not far away the flames were devouring the forest hungrily—and the wind was behind the flames!

There must have already been a change in the air-current, as Chet had prophesied. The forest fire was driving right into this narrow cut between the hills. To be caught here by the flames would not only mean the finish of this brand new car, but Hester knew that there would be no escape for her from such a situation.

CHAPTER XIV

RACING THE FLAMES

HESTER'S car jarred down to a complete stop. The smoke stung her eyes and it began to be difficult for her to breathe. She knew that she had come too far on this road. She should have heeded Chet Belding's warning.

But now she needed all her courage and coolness to get her out of the hot corner into which she had so heedlessly driven the automobile. The road was not more than thirty feet wide and the thick woods bordered it on either hand. Out of the covert dashed a flash of rusty brown that was gone in an instant. Hester knew it to be a fox. Already she had seen the rabbits running, and not a bird was in sight.

The fire was coming—and coming by leaps and bounds!

It smote upon Hester Grimes's mind that not alone were she and the innocent animals of the wood in peril; but there were lonely farms, deep in the forest, where the houses were so near the woods that the fire was sure to destroy them.

Who would warn those squatters and small

farmers of the danger down here in the cut? When once the flames rose over the ridge, with the wind behind them, they would descend the other side with the swiftness of an express train.

Crops, orchards, outbuildings, and dwellings would all be sacrificed to the demon of flame. And some of the families along that far road on which the Sitz farm lay would scarcely have time to flee.

But Hester, as she often said herself, "was no namby-pamby girl." She made a deal of fun of her chum, Lily, because the latter was always so helpless—or appeared to be—in time of trouble.

She was alone, at the edge of this burning forest, with this big car. It had to be turned around, and then she must run it out of the line of the fire. Her father would have something to say—and that to much purpose—if she lost this brand new car, which he had not even paid for as yet.

She started the car on the reverse, and twisted the wheel. The car backed, and shook, and she stopped it just as a rear tire collided with a stump. She must go ahead, and back, and go ahead again, and reverse once more, and repeat the operation half a dozen times before the car would be headed in the proper direction.

The smoke grew thicker and thicker—and

more choking. Her eyes were half blinded by tears, for the smoke stung them sadly. But soon she was free. The car could fly back over the road which it had lately descended, and once out of the cut her peril would be past.

But on the very moment of starting ahead again Hester heard a great crashing in the bushes. Out into the road ahead of the car sprawled on hands and knees a man—or the semblance of one. For the instant Hester scarcely knew what to make of the figure sprawling there before the car. But she shut down again so as not to run over it.

Then the individual arose to his knees and waved his arms weakly. His clothing was in rags. Indeed, he had only half a shirt and the remains of his overalls left upon his body, besides his shoes. His hair had been singed from his head. A great angry burn disfigured one side of his face, while the beard was crisped to cinders on the other side. He was without eyebrows and eyelashes, and his eyes stared from deep hollows in his face—or so it seemed.

"For heaven's sake, help me!" he gasped. "Take me aboard! Take me away from here!"

He struggled to his feet and fell again. He had come as far as he could. Had the road not been right where it was, the man must have

fallen in the woods and been swept again by the flames.

Hester sprang up, caught him around the waist and half dragged him to the car. She was thoroughly scared now; but she was courageous enough to aid this man who was more unfortunate than herself.

"Get in! get in!" she cried, flinging open the door of the tonneau. "We must hurry."

"You bet we gotter hurry!" gasped the man, as he crawled into the car and she banged to the door so that he would not fall out.

Into her own seat Hester sprang. The car was jarring with the throb of the engine. If it should balk now, what would become of them?

The frightened girl turned the switch carefully. The car rolled on. It moved faster and faster along the narrow road. The smoke was now so thick that she was running the car blindly. At any moment the wheels might hit a stump at the side of the road, for she could not be sure that she was keeping in the main-traveled path.

While they were in the cut she heard nothing from the man behind. But when the car shot up the hill out of the cut to the ridge-ground, and left the smoke behind, the man struggled up into the seat and leaned over to speak to her.

"You air a brave gal!" he gasped. "Woof! my lungs is burnt to a crisp—I swallered so much smoke. Ye jest erbout saved my life, Miss."

Hester made no reply. She was winking the tears out of her eyes, and the pressure in her own lungs hurt.

"But there air a lot of folks goin' to be caught similar over the ridge, if we can't warn 'em."

"What's that?" she demanded, quickly, but without looking around at him.

"My name's Billson. I live back in the bottoms yonder. I got an acre or two cleared around my cabin; but the bresh warn't burned up. It is now, by jinks!" added Mr. Billson, with a grim cackle.

"When the wind veered thar so suddent, it caught me. I had to run through a wall of fire at one place. Then I got acrost the crick and that saved me for a while. But the fire would have caught me again if it hadn't been for you. I am sure mighty much obleeged to ye."

"I—I'm glad I was there with the car," faltered Hester.

"And we've got to warn those other folks over the hill," cried the man, coughing. "Gee! I guess I'll never get this smoke out o' my lungs."

"But how can we get to those other farms?" gasped Hester.

"I'll show ye. There's a crossroad along here a spell. An automobile can git through it on a pinch. And there's two families live on *that* road, too."

"Do you s'pose they'll be in danger?" asked Hester, slowly.

"In course they are. Say! you ain't afraid, are you?" demanded the man. "I tell ye the fire is coming. It's going to sweep this whole ridge."

"Won't—won't they see it?"

"Did *I* see it?" demanded the squatter. "Not soon enough, you bet. Drive on, Miss. Surely you ain't goin' to show a yaller streak now?"

"But my—my chauffeur is waiting for me along the road here toward town."

"Let him wait. He's out of danger. There are plenty of open fields in that direction. *He* won't get into no trouble. You drive through this side road like I tell you, and we'll get clear around by Sitz's farm ahead of the fire. But drive hard!"

Inspired by the man's excitement, Hester did as she was told. They came to the crossroad, which she remembered, and turned into it. There was little smoke here beyond the ridge. Nobody would have suspected the raging pit of flame down there in the cut to the southeast.

Yet the flames were advancing on the wings of the wind. Hester had seen enough to assure her that the case was serious indeed. Once the fire topped the ridge the whole northern slope would be swept by a billow of flame!

The picture of these farmsteads burning and the people being unable to escape with their live-stock and sundry possessions began to take form in Hester's mind. She speeded up the car and it rushed through the gathering twilight like a locomotive of a fast express.

At the first house they stopped for only a moment. Hester turned on the car lamps, for the shadows were gathering in the narrow places along the road now. The squatter did not have to urge the danger upon the farmers. A look at his condition told its own story. A forest fire is a terrible thing, and once it gets under way usual means of fire-fighting are of no avail.

On and on raced the motor car. Along the summit of the wooded ridge behind them the glow of the fire spread to a deep rose—then to a crimson—against the sky. It was an angry light and the smoke that billowed up from it began to canopy the heavens.

From certain heights Hester could see far down into the city of Centerport, with its countless twinkling lights. The forest fire must burn

out long before it reached the edge of the city; but detached houses, here and there, were in peril—and many farmers got out their teams and ploughed fresh furrows around their stacks and buildings.

They rushed through Tentorville at a speed that made the dogs howl and the women run to the doors of their houses, leaving their suppers to burn. Beyond this straggling little settlement there were better farms. The village was not endangered by the flames, for there were open fields all around it.

At the next house the occupants had been warned by telephone; for news of the advancing fire had been wired from beyond the ridge, toward Keyport.

The better class of farmers were supplied with 'phones, and they were warned; but the man who had been burned out of his own place was interested in the other poor people—the tenant farmer and squatter class.

"Them fellers can't stand the expense of telephones," he told Hester. "And they work moughty hard and will go to bed airly. If they haven't kalkerlated on the veering of the wind they won't know anything about it till the fire's upon 'em."

Thirty-seven of such farmers and settlers did

the rushing auto visit. Hester and her comrade must have startled some of these people dreadfully, for the auto dashed up to the little farmsteads with the noise of an express train, and the scorched man yelled his loudest to the inmates:

"Git up! Git up! the fire's comin'. It'll be over the ridge before midnight and this hull mountainside'll crackle in flames. Git out!"

Then, at the first word in reply from the aroused inmates, the girl and her companion rushed on in their car, and sometimes before the people in the house realized what had passed, the car was out of sight.

For nearly two hours from the time Hester had helped the man into her car did she speed about the country. By that time both he, and the girl—and the gasoline—were about exhausted.

They pulled up at a country store where they sold gasoline, and Hester refilled her tank. There she telephoned home to her family, too. Joseph had come in on another auto and Hester's father was about to send out a general alarm for his absent daughter.

"What in thunder are you doing, riding over the country alone?" her father demanded over the telephone.

"Now, don't you mind. I'm all right," said

Hester, tartly. "I'm coming home now—by the way of the Sitz place and Robinson's Woods. We've done all we can to rouse up the farmers."

And she shut her angry father off before he could say more, and ran out to the car—to find her companion senseless in the bottom of the tonneau, and a local doctor bending over him.

CHAPTER XV

THE KEYPORT GAME

"THESE are bad burns," said the physician, looking up at the wide-eyed crowd. "And I believe he is hurt internally. Where did he come from?"

"This gal brought him in her car, Doc," said the storekeeper, who had forgotten trade for the moment.

"Who is he?" asked the physician, with his hand on the man's pulse, but looking curiously at Hester.

"I don't know—oh, yes! I remember! He said his name was Billson."

"Jeffers-pelters!" ejaculated the storekeeper. "I'd never ha' knowed him. His whiskers is burned off, that's a fac'."

"Then you know all about him, Carey?" pursued the medical man.

"Not much! not much!" exclaimed the storekeeper, hastily. "He's jest a squatter. Come from one of the lower counties, I b'lieve. Hol-

ler-chested. Bad lungs, he said. Goin' to live in the open an' cure 'em."

"He ought to go to the hospital at once," growled the doctor.

"I can take him," said Hester, quietly. "He's a very brave man, I believe. He warned all the people through the section back of Tentorville——"

"I guess you druv the car, Miss," cackled Carey, the storekeeper.

"But I should have driven it home in a hurry after finding him on the road without knowing anything about the people in danger," said the girl, honestly. "He did it."

"No matter who did it. I want to get him to the hospital. I'll go to Centerport with him, Miss, if you'll take us."

"Of course," said Hester.

"You know him, Carey," said the doctor, turning to the storekeeper. "Can I use your name at the hospital in Centerport?"

"No, you can't," said the other, quickly. "I can't stand no 'nearest friend' game for a man that never spent fo' bits a week in my store for groceries. No. I dunno him."

"We'll stand sponsor for him, sir," said Hester, hastily. "Come on. You'll have to tell me how to drive. I don't know these roads very well."

"What's your name, Miss?" asked the physician, climbing into the car as Hester touched the electric starter.

Hester told him, and the medical man nodded. "Henry Grimes's gal, eh?" he said. "Well, he's well able to be sponsor for this poor fellow. Drive on."

He was a shabby old man, this country doctor. His name was Leffert, and he seemed none too blessed with this world's goods. But he was kindly and he eased the senseless man into a comfortable position in the tonneau with the gentleness of a woman.

The car started on the long run to Centerport with a plentifully filled tank. And the engine worked nicely. When they passed the Sitz place Hester saw that the farmer and Otto were out ploughing along the edge of the woods by lantern light. But the sky above the ridge glowed like a live coal. The forest fire was sweeping on.

When they came down the hill past Robinson's Woods the doctor nudged Hester from behind.

"Hadn't you better take that left-hand turn, Miss?" he demanded.

"What for? This is the nearest way," returned the girl, slowing down a bit.

"But it goes through the Four Corners. They have a habit of setting on automobiles there."

"They won't dare bother us," declared Hester. "Most of those people work for father."

"Aw—well," said the doctor, and sat down again.

The car roared through the settlement of shacks about the Four Corners like a fast express. Nobody tried to bother them. In twenty minutes thereafter the car stopped at the City Hospital. The patient was carried in on a stretcher, and one of the internes took Hester's name and address. Dr. Leffert evidently had no standing at the institution, and he merely handed the patient over to the hospital authorities and hurried away. Hester drove the car home and found both her mother and father excitedly awaiting her coming.

"Now, don't you bother about me—or the car!" she said, sharply, when her parents began to take her to task for worrying them so. "I haven't had a bite to eat, and I'm tired, too. Your old car isn't hurt any——"

"But you can't ride that car all over this country alone, Hess! I swear I won't have it!"

"But I *did* drive it alone, didn't I? And it isn't hurt any. Neither am I," she replied, and it was several days before her parents learned the particulars of their daughter's wild ride over the mountainside with the squatter, Billson, warning the small farmers of the coming fire.

"I declare for't!" her mother then said. "You're the greatest girl, Hess! The folks say you're a heroine."

"They say a whole lot beside their prayers, I reckon," snapped Hester.

"But one of the country papers has got a long article in it about you and that Mr. Billson. Only they don't know your name."

"No. I told Doc. Leffert to keep still about it," said Hester. "Now! there's been enough talk. I want two dollars, Ma. I want to send that Billson some jelly and some flowers. He's having a mighty hard time at the hospital. And there isn't a soul who cares anything about him—whether he lives or dies."

"Ain't that just like you, Hessie?" complained her mother. "You throw that poor fellow good things like you was throwing a bone to a dog! I—I wish you wasn't so hard."

But events were making Hester seem harder than usual these days. She was completely cut off from the society of her school fellows. She had no part in the after-hour athletics. Nobody spoke to her about the fine time expected at Keyport when the basketball team went over to battle with the team of the Keyport High.

And when that day arrived, fully a carload entrained at the Hill station of the C. K. & M.

Railroad, bound for the neighboring city. These were all the girls of Central High interested in the game and their friends among the boys.

It was not a long run by train to Keyport, but they had a lot of fun. Chet and Lance were full of an incident that had occurred in Professor Dimp's class that morning, and Chet was telling his sister and a group of friends about it.

"Short and Long got one on Old Dimple again to-day," said Chet. "You know he's forever hammering the Romans into us. We ought to call him 'The Old Roman'—we really had! There's that Roman lad who was such an athlete and all-around pug——"

"'Pug!'" gasped Laura. "Wait till mother hears you say *that.*"

"Ha! I'm going to watch to see that she doesn't hear me, Sis," returned her brother. "Well, Old Dimple was telling us about this lad who used to swim across the Tiber three times before breakfast. And when he'd expatiated on the old boy's performance, Short and Long put up a mitt——"

"'A mitt!'" groaned Laura again.

"Aw, well! His hand, then. Dimple perked right up, thinking that Short and Long was really showing some interest, and says he:

"'What's your question, Mr. Long?'

"And Billy says: 'What's puzzling me, is why he swam it *three* times?'

"'Eh?' says Dimple. 'How's that, young man?'

"'Why didn't he swim it *four* times,' says Billy, grave as a judge, 'and so get back to the bank where he'd left his clothes?' And not a smile cracked Short and Long's face! Dimple didn't know whether to laugh or get mad, and just then the gong sounded 'Time' and Dimple got out of it without answering Billy's question."

"Tickets!" cried Lance, as the girls laughed at the story. "Here comes the conductor. Get your pasteboards ready."

"Who says that's the conductor, Lance?" demanded Chet.

"Huh! It's Mr. Wood, isn't it? He's the conductor of this train."

"Impossible," sighed Chet. "Wood is a non-conductor."

But the crowd wouldn't stand for puns like that and shouted Chet down.

When they debarked at the Keyport station they formed in marching order and, the boys with canes and the girls with flags, marched two by two to the Keyport girls' athletic field. The game was called for four o'clock, and Mrs. Case got her team out and "warmed them up" with

ten minutes' practice before the referee called both teams to the court selected for the match game.

The boys in the audience droned out the Central High yell, with its "snap-the-whip" ending of, "Ziz—z—z—z—— Boom!" and the ball was thrown into play. Right at the start the home team got the best of the visitors. There were excellent players on the Keyport team. Indeed, in all athletics the Keyport girls had excelled for years. Our friends from Central High were outmatched at several points.

But they fought hard. Laura and her mates battled every moment, and when the whistle ending the first half sounded, the Keyport team was only two points ahead. But the visitors ran to their dressing room in no hopeful frame of mind.

CHAPTER XVI

UPHILL WORK FOR THE TEAM

"I declare!" ejaculated Bobby Hargrew; "we're being whipped out of our boots!"

"I'm doing the best I can!" wailed Roberta Fish.

"Nobody's blaming you, child," Jess Morse hastened to say.

"Not at all," added Laura. "I haven't a single complaint to make about your work, Roberta."

"But there's something lacking somewhere," declared Dorothy Lockwood.

"We might as well admit that these Keyport girls are better at basketball than we are," said her twin.

"My gracious!" cried Bobby. "They're better than we ever *dared* to be!"

"No!" cried Laura. "That is not so."

"What's the answer, then, Miss Captain?" demanded the irrepressible.

"We must play up to each other, that's all," said the captain. "Our playing is loose."

"We're weak in spots," admitted Nellie Agnew, slowly.

"And I'm the worst spot," groaned Roberta.

"Pshaw! you're not, either," said Eve Sitz, kindly.

"You do your very best, Roberta," said Laura, again.

"But that isn't as good as Hester's best," responded Roberta, quickly.

"Hessie is certainly one mighty good player," grumbled Bobby.

"And we got rid of her rather hastily," sighed Nellie.

"Don't wail about that now!" cried Josephine Morse, with some asperity. "My goodness! I'm only glad she's out of it. And I reckon Laura is."

"I am sorry it seemed best to ask her to get out," admitted the captain.

"Bah! she was more trouble than she was good," declared Jess. "Let's not weep and wail over what we did."

"But have you heard what she did last week, girls?" asked the doctor's daughter, earnestly.

"What now?" returned Bobby, with curiosity.

"Remember the day we found her broken down in that new car of her father's on the Keyport road?"

"Sure!" cried several of the team together.

"That was the day of that big forest fire. You know, Chet warned her that the wind was likely to change and blow the fire across the road. Well, she rescued a man from the burning woods and then ran that car all over the hill country up there, warning farmers and other people that the fire was coming. She is a very brave girl," concluded Nellie, softly.

"Pshaw! don't you weep over Hess Grimes," exclaimed Bobby. "You're too tender-hearted, Nell."

"But she *is* brave," said Laura, hastily.

"And just as ill-tempered as she can be," put in Jess Morse. "We're well rid of her."

"I guess nobody in this world is quite perfect —nor all bad, either," suggested the doctor's daughter. "And as for Hester, she never let us see her good points."

"But some mighty mean ones!" exclaimed Dora Lockwood.

"Just the same," sighed Laura, "if she had only stuck to the rules of basketball in playing she would have been a great help to us right now!"

Lily had been "prinking up" at the other end of the room while this conversation was going on. Now she flung them one malicious "I told you so!" as the gong rang and they hurried out to their places in the basketball court.

"All ready?" cried the referee.

"Do your best, girls!" begged Laura.

The whistle sounded long and loud at the toss-up and the game was on. At first, although the play was fast and furious, neither side scored. Then came the umpire's shout:

"Foul on Central High for over-guarding!"

It rattled Laura and her team mates. Their opponents got the ball and shot it basketward. Right from the field Keyport made a basket. And then, in little over half a minute they made another!

"Break it up, guards! Break it up!" begged Laura.

But although the girls of Central High fought hard, and there were some brilliant plays on the part of Laura and Jess, it was all to no avail. Nor did the "rooting" of their boy friends help. The Keyport team forged ahead steadily and at the end of the game they were six points in the lead. It was as bad a beating as the girls of Central High had ever received in a trophy game.

Roberta was in tears in the dressing room when Mrs. Case came in to cheer them up.

"Now, now! what have I told you about being good losers?" she demanded, briskly.

"Tha—that's all right," stammered Roberta. "We cheered 'em, didn't we? But I feel it's my fault. I fumble dreadfully. You know, I al-

ways did when I was on the team before. Get somebody else in my place, Mrs. Case—do!"

Naturally Lily Pendleton told all this to Hester; but it only added to Hester's bitterness of spirit. Deep down in her heart she felt the sting of Central High's defeat—only she wouldn't admit it. The team had lost—she believed it, too—because she wasn't there in her place at forward center!

And Mrs. Case had tried to show her how she might win back, if she would, and Hester had refused. Her bad temper had cut her off from the instructor's help entirely. She was a pariah—and she felt it.

So she told Lily she was glad the team was having up-hill work and was so nasty about it that Lily, who was feeling bad, too, about the affair, almost got mad herself, and went home early.

"That Hester Grimes *can* be awfully exasperating when she wants to be," Lily admitted to her mother.

"Bless me, child! I don't really see why you associate so much with her. She does come of such common people. Why, Mrs. Grimes is impossible!" sighed Mrs. Pendleton.

CHAPTER XVII

HEBE POCOCK IN TROUBLE

The big frost came soon after the Keyport game and Eve excitedly informed her particular friends when she came in to school that the nuts were falling in showers. It was toward the end of the week when this happened and it had already been arranged that a nutting party should take an entire Saturday for the trip to Peveril Pond, some miles beyond the Sitz place.

The Beldings' car and one of Mr. Purcell's sight-seeing autos were to carry the party from the Hill, with two seats reserved for Eve and her brother Otto, whom they would pick up at the farmhouse. Prettyman Sweet and Lily Pendleton were invited—indeed, Eve had insisted upon all the basketball team being of the party—and Purt was dreadfully exercised in advance regarding what would be the proper costume to wear.

"Oh," said Bobby Hargrew, "when folks go fox-hunting in the fall they wear red coats, because the fox is red, I suppose. Now, you ought to wear a nut-brown suit, hadn't you?"

"Yes, Purt," drawled Lance Darby, "something nutty will suit you, all right, all right!"

The girls wore sweaters and old caps and old skirts and lace up boots—all but Lily. She came "dressed to the nines," as Bobby declared.

"What under the sun are you supposed to represent, Lil?" demanded Jess Morse. "You—you look like a fancy milkmaid."

"Well, I'm going into the country; I shall look the part," said Lily, demurely.

"Oh, say!" continued Jess, in a whisper, "you've got altogether too much red on your cheeks for a milkmaid, young lady."

At that Lily flushed deeper than the "fast color" on her cheek.

"Is that so, Miss?" she snapped. "I guess a milkmaid ought to be rosy-cheeked."

Chet, going by, overheard this. He glanced at the red spots in Lily's naturally pale cheek, and laughed.

"On the contrary," he said, winking at Jess.

"What's on the contrary?" demanded Lily, sharply.

"Milkmaids shouldn't be rosy-cheeked, you know," said Chet, gravely.

"Why not, Mr. Funny?"

"Because a milkmaid is naturally a pail girl," chortled Chet.

Lily was rather angry for a while because they joked her about the rouge. She was the only girl in all the Junior class who used cosmetics and, as Chet laughingly said once, "painting the Lily was a thankless job—it didn't improve her looks!"

They piled into the two autos and started off with much laughter and blowing of horns. Nellie Agnew was almost the last one to board the Beldings' car.

"I had to run down to Mrs. Doyle's for Daddy Doctor," she explained. "Poor little Johnny is dreadfully sick. He never really recovered from the shock, or the cold, when he fell into the sewer basin. He's such a poor, weak little thing now. It would make your heart ache to see him, Laura."

"Lil says that Hester goes there all the time, and that she's always doing something for Rufe, or the rest of them," Jess Morse said.

Laura shook her head. "I know," she said. "I saw Hester and Rufie in the park together the other day. They seem to be very good friends. And I'm sorry."

"Why—for pity's sake?" demanded Nellie.

"Why, father is on the Board of Education this year, you know, and he told us—but you mustn't repeat it!—that Bill Jackway had admitted that the night the gym. was first raided

Rufus slipped into the building unbeknown to him early in the evening, and was there until after midnight. Then he cried to go home, being afraid, he said. But Jackway let him out without ever making the rounds of the gym., and so he doesn't know for sure whether the damage to the apparatus was done while Rufe was there, or afterward."

"My goodness me!" gasped Nellie. "How awful!"

"Could it be that half-foolish boy, do you suppose?" cried Jess.

"He isn't so foolish. Rufe is dreadfully cunning about some things," replied Laura. "Think of those footprints in the athletic field. I *know* the person who made them walked backwards. Maybe Rufe got into the gym. again unknown to his uncle; and he'd be just sharp enough to get out of that window backward and so reach the fence."

"And he could be hired to do that for a little money," said Jess, confidently.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that!" exclaimed Nellie. "It's too dreadful."

"But Mr. Jackway can't make Rufe admit it. The boy won't speak. And the Board doesn't know what to do about it," Laura said. "Now, I've told you girls this; don't let it go any farther."

They promised—and they were girls who could keep their word. Lance and Chet on the front seat of the machine, with Bobby between them, hadn't heard it at all.

When the cars reached the Sitz place Eve and Otto were taken into the tonneau of the Beldings' car, and they went on, down the leaf-strewn road, toward Peveril Pond. The forest fire that had threatened all this side of the ridge had burned out without crossing the wide highway known as "the State Road" and so the lower slope of the ridge and all the valley had been untouched.

They passed the district school which Eve attended before she came to Central High.

"And we had a splendid teacher at the last," sighed Eve. "But when I first went to it—oh! the boys acted so horrid, and the girls gabbled so. It wasn't a school. My mother said it was 'a bear garden!'

"You see, there were some dreadfully bad big boys went to the school, off and on. The Four Corners isn't so far away, you know. Hebe Pocock—Laura will remember him?"

"I guess so!" cried Laura.

"Well, he was one of the big boys in school when I first came here. We had a new teacher —we were always having 'new' teachers. Sometimes there would be as many as four in one term. If they were girls they broke down and

cried and gave it up; and if they were young men they were either beaten or driven out of the neighborhood.

"But I can remember this particular young man pretty well, little as I was," laughed Eve. "He wasn't very big, but he didn't look puny, although he wore glasses. But when he opened school he took off the glasses and put them in his desk. He was real mild mannered, and he had a nice smile, and the big girls liked him. But Hebe and the other big boys said they were going to run him off right quick!"

"And did they?" asked Jess, interested.

"Well, I'll tell you. He was taking the names of all us children, and he got along all right till he came to Hebe. Hebron was the ring leader. He always gave the sign for trouble. When the master asked his name Hebe leaned back in his seat, put his feet up on the desk, and looked cross-eyed at the new teacher. Of course, all the little follows thought it was funny—and some of the girls, too, I guess.

"'Please tell me your name,' said the master, without seeming to notice Hebe's impudence.

"'Wal,' drawled Hebe, 'sometimes they call me Bob, and sometimes Pete, and sometimes they call me too late for dinner. But don't you call me nothin', Mister!'

"The teacher listened until he got through," said Eve, her eyes flashing at the remembrance of the scene, "and then he doubled his fist and struck Hebe a blow between the eyes that half stunned him. Hebe was the bigger, but that teacher was awfully strong and smart. He grabbed Hebe by the collar and hauled him headlong over the desks and seats, stood him up before the big desk with a slam, and roared at him:

"'What is your name?'

"'He—Hebe Pocock,' exclaimed the fellow, only half sensing what had happened to him.

"'Hebe?' repeated the master, with a sneer. 'You look like a 'Hebe.' Go take your seat.'

"And do you know," laughed Eve, "that Hebe was almost the best behaved boy in the school all that term?"

"Oh!" laughed Jess, "it must be lots of fun to go to an ungraded school like that one."

"It's all according to the teacher," Eve said. "When we had a poor teacher it was just a scramble for the scholars to learn anything. The big ones helped the little ones. But our present teacher, Miss Harris, is a college girl and she is fine. But some funny things happen because we have the old-fashioned district system of government, with 'school trustees' elected every year. This year at the far end of the district

they put in old Mr. Moose, a very illiterate man, for trustee. And one of the girls was telling me about the day he visited school to 'examine' it. That is the method, you know; each trustee makes an official visit and is supposed to find out in that visit how the teachers are getting along."

"Tell us about it, Eve," urged Laura.

"Why," laughed Eve, "Mr. Moose came in and sat on the teacher's platform for a while, listening and watching, and showing himself to be dreadfully uncomfortable. But he thought he had to make some attempt to examine the school, so when Miss Harris called the spelling class he reached for the speller and said he'd put out a few words. So he read to the first boy:

"'Spell "eggpit."'

"'E—double g—p—i—t,' says the boy.

"'Nope,' says Mr. Moose. 'Next.'

"Next scholar spelled it the same way and that didn't suit Mr. Moose, and so it went on down the line, everybody taking a shy at 'Eggpit.' Finally Miss Harris asked to see the book.

"'These young 'uns of yourn air mighty bad spellers,' said Mr. Moose.

"'But they have all spelled 'eggpit' right,' said Miss Harris. 'Where is the word?'

"And what do you suppose Moose pointed out?" chuckled Eve.

"Give it up!" was the chorus of her listeners "'Egypt!'"

"My goodness!" cried Jess, choked with laughter. "Can you beat that for a school trustee?"

They arrived at the sloping hollow at the end of Peveril Pond, where they proposed to picnic, very soon after this. It was a pretty glade, and the smooth road went down to the shore and skirted it for half a mile.

Off on a rocky point were several boys or men fishing; but they were not near enough to disturb our friends. Of course the boys clamored for lunch at once; but while the girls prepared it the boys were shooed off to begin the nut gathering.

Lance Darby, with a perfectly solemn face, set Pretty Sweet to work thumping an oak tree with a huge club to "rattle off the nuts;" and he might have been whaling away at the trunk of the tree until luncheon had not Chet taken pity on him and showed him that neither chestnuts or shellbarks grew on oak trees, and that that particular oak didn't even have an acorn on it!

Suddenly, just as the girls had the good things spread on the seats of the two cars, a chorus of screams arose from the fishermen. There were three of them, and when our friends' gaze was attracted by the shouts they saw that the bigger

one was down in the water and the other two were leaping about on the sands.

"Guess they've caught a whale," said Chet.

"They are in trouble—serious trouble," declared his sister, leaving the car herself to start for the scene of the difficulty.

"That's little Mike Pocock," said Eve, grabbing her arm. "And I believe the fellow in the water is Hebe."

"Never mind. He's in some difficulty. See! he can't stand up," cried Laura.

"But weally!" gasped Prettyman Sweet. "The lunch is just weady——"

"Come on, you cannibal!" ejaculated Lance. "Let's see what's wanted over there."

The whole party, girls as well as boys, trooped along the shore of the pond toward the rock where the fishermen had been standing. They saw in a moment that this boulder had rolled over—probably while Hebe Pocock was standing upon it to make a cast—and that Hebe was caught by the rock and held down to the bottom of the pond. He was barely able to keep his head out of water as the boys and girls of Central High approached.

CHAPTER XVIII

MOTHER WIT TO THE RESCUE

THE young ruffian who was so notorious about the Four Corners was really in a serious predicament. In making a long cast the boulder had rolled under him and, being precipitated into the pond, he was pinned to the bottom by his legs. The two boys with him had sprung into the pond, and were now wet to their necks; but they could not roll back the heavy boulder.

Just as Laura and Chet, with their school mates, arrived Hebe sank back with a gurgle, and the water went over his head. He had been barely able to keep his mouth and nostrils out of water until that moment.

"Hebe's gettin' drowned! Hebe's gettin' drowned!" yelled Mike, the victim's young brother, dancing up and down on the shore.

"Get in there at once and hold his head up!" commanded Laura Belding. "Then we'll roll away the stone. But he *will* drown if you don't hold him up."

Mike did as he was bid. When Hebe got his

breath again he began to use language that was unfit for the girls to hear, at least.

"Say!" exclaimed Chet, his eyes blazing, "you stop that or I'll hold your head under the water myself. What kind of a fellow are you, anyway?"

Hebe gasped and kept still. Perhaps he had scarcely realized who the people were about him. Laura said:

"Can't you boys, all together, roll away that stone?"

"We'll try," said Lance, already beginning to strip off his shoes and stockings. "Come ahead, Chet."

They made even Purt Sweet join them, barefooted and with their trousers rolled up as far as they would go. They waded in and got around the rock. Hebe was in a sitting posture, and the weight of the stone bore both his legs down into the muddy bottom. But there was hardpan under the mud, and it was impossible to drag the victim from beneath the huge rock.

But the boys couldn't even jar the rock. It had slipped from the bank and rolled a little, and now it was settling slowly into the ooze, bearing Hebe's legs down under it.

The situation was serious in the extreme. Slowly, as Hebe settled beneath the rock, the

water was creeping up about his lips and nose. Although he held his head back the water would, in time, rise above his mouth. And the rise was as steady as a tide.

Again and again Chet Belding and his comrades tried to push the huge rock over. But, as at first, they could not even budge it. Mike began to cry again. Hebe said, gruffly:

"I reckon I gotter croak, eh? This ain't no nice way to die, you bet!"

"Die—nothing!" cried Laura.

She ran back to the car and tore the piece of rubber pipe away from the bulb of the horn. Handing this to Hebe, she showed him how he could lie back in a more comfortable position, if he wished, and breathe through the tube. She produced some cotton, too, so that he could stop his ears and nostrils.

"Now, you keep up your courage," Mother Wit told him. "We'll soon find a way of getting you out of this. You're not dead yet."

Hebe said nothing, but he watched her, when his eyes were above water, with a grateful air.

"But I tell you, Laura, we can't begin to start this stone even," growled Chet, in her ear. "You will have to think of something better than *this*."

"So I will," cried Laura. "I'll think of a rope."

"A rope?"

"Yes. A good, strong one. One that will go around that rock and then be plenty long enough to hitch to one of the cars—the big car. I believe we can start the rock that way."

"Hurrah!" cried Lance. "She's got the idea! What do you say, Chet?"

"Looks like it. But how about the rope? Where'll we get it?"

"We got a goot one at our house," said Otto, who was sitting down, puffing, after having strained at the rock. "Dot hay rope, he be juist de t'ing."

"The hay rope for ours, then," cried Chet. "Come on, Otto. We'll go after it!"

He started for the machines, the Swiss youth after him. They got in the Belding car immediately and started the engine. Purt Sweet sprang up with a yell and ran along the shore of the pond after the car.

"Oh, oh! Stop!" he shrieked.

But Chet did not hear him. Lance caught Pretty by the arm and demanded to know what he was yelling about.

"Why," gasped Purt, "they've driven off with a whole lot of the lunch the girls spread on the seats. And look at them go! Why! it'll all be joggled onto the floor of the tonneau before they get back."

"Oh—*you!*" exclaimed Lance, balked for words with which to express his contempt.

The Belding car was quickly out of sight. The boys and girls gathered around the spot where Hebe Pocock had met with his accident. Nobody could help him, and he began to be in extreme pain. His head was under water a good deal of the time; but the piece of rubber pipe allowed him to breathe, and Mike, or the other smaller boy from the Four Corners, held Hebe's face above water as much as possible.

Chet and Otto were not gone an hour; but it seemed, as Lance said, "a creation of time." Pocock was pretty weak when the rope was brought. Meanwhile the chauffeur had run the big car along the road and backed it near the rock and headed in the proper direction. They passed the heavy cable around the boulder and then wrapped it around the car so that the strain would not come in any one place and perhaps do the car damage.

"You bigger boys get in there," said Laura, "and take Hebe under the arms. As soon as the rock moves pull him out. For the rope may slip and the rock slide back deeper into the water than it is now. That would kill him, perhaps."

"You're right, Laura," said her brother, gravely. "We'll take care."

Chet and Lance went to the aid of the unfortunate youth. Otto managed the rope. The chauffeur started his engine and got into his seat.

"Ready! start easily," called Laura, when the boys were placed directly behind Hebe.

The car lurched forward; the rope strained and creaked; then—slowly but surely—the rock began to move.

"Easy, boys!" commanded Laura.

Hebe shrieked with pain. The boulder rolled and the rope slipped. But the two boys darted back into deeper water, dragging the victim of the accident with them.

It was all over and Hebe was released in a few seconds. But he had lost consciousness and they carried him out and put him into the Belding car.

"Shall we take him home?" Chet demanded.

"He ought to have a doctor at once," said Laura. "Better still, he ought to be taken to the hospital."

"That's what we'll do," said Chet, quickly. "Lance, you and Purt come with me. We'll make him easy in the tonneau. And gee! here's the luncheon all in a jumble."

"What did I tell you?" wailed Prettyman.

"Oh, get in! get in!" exclaimed Chet. "You can stuff your face with all those goodies while

we ride into town. And maybe this poor fellow will come to his senses and try Nellie's lemon meringue pie—it's a dandy, Nellie!"

By the shortest road they could take—through the Four Corners—the ride to the City Hospital was bound to occupy an hour—and another to return. Meanwhile the remainder of the party had their lunch and then went after the nut harvest. Despite the incident of the wounded Pocock, the day ended happily enough and they went home at dusk with stores of chestnuts and shellbarks.

The Beldings were late, of course, and Mammy Jinny, their old black cook, held back dinner for them, but with many complaints.

"It's jest de beatenes' what disher fambly is a-comin' to," she grumbled, as she helped wait at table when the family had gathered for the belated meal. "Gits so, anyhow, dat de hull on youse is out 'most all day long. Eberything comes onter Mammy's shoulders."

"That's all right, Jinny. They're good and broad," said Mr. Belding, for she was a privileged character.

"Ya—as. Dat's wot youse allus say, Mars' Belding. Den dere was de watah man come ter bodder we-uns. Sech a combobberation I never do see. I tol' him we nebber drink no tap watah,

but has it bro't in bottles, same as nice fo'ks does——"

"The water man?" repeated Mrs. Belding, curiously. "I can't imagine who that could be."

"Ya—as, ma'am!" exclaimed Mammy Jinny, who certainly loved the sound of long words, and hard words. "He come yere enquiratin' erbout de tuberculosis in de watah."

"Crickey jacks!" gasped Chet, choking. "What's that?"

"My son!" begged his mother. "Please do not use such awful expressions. You are worse than Jinny."

"Ain't nothin' de matter wid wot I sez!" declared the old black woman. "Dat's wot he wanted ter know erbout—de tuberculosis in de watah."

Mr. Belding recovered his breath. "Was by chance the man asking about the *consumption* of water, Jinny?" he asked.

"Dat's it," said the black woman. "Same t'ing, ain't it? Miss Laura say so. 'Consumption' an' 'tuberculosis' jes de same—heh?"

"That's one on you, Laura!" shouted Chet, as Mammy Jinny indignantly waddled out. "Shouldn't teach Mammy words of more than one 'syllabub.' You've been warned before.

"By the way," he added, for they had told

their parents about the adventure of the afternoon, "that Pocock is in the ward with the man Hester Grimes saved from the forest fire—right in the next bed to Billson. Pocock had both legs broken, the doctors told me—one above the knee and the other below. He's going to have a bad time of it."

"Pocock, eh?" said Mr. Belding. "Hebron Pocock is the name of the person who applied to the Board of Education for the job of watchman at the girls' gymnasium. I believe he gave Henry Grimes as reference. But I think we shall keep Jackway. He's a faithful soul and, whoever got into the gym. and did that damage, I am convinced that it was not Jackway's fault."

"No; it wasn't Jackway's fault," muttered Chet to Laura. "But I guess we could find the person at fault pretty easily, eh?"

CHAPTER XIX

AT LUMBERPORT

The girls of Central High were not neglecting other athletic work through their interest in basketball; but just as the boys were giving most of their spare time to football, so their sisters, during the fall weather, were mainly interested in their own game.

As a whole, the girls' classes of Central High were given practice at the game at least twice a week; and of course the representative team, to which our particular friends belonged, was on the court almost daily. There were games between the less advanced teams, too, which brought the parents of the girls to the athletic field; and as the season advanced the courts were marked out in the large upper room of the gymnasium building, so that the game could be played under cover on stormy days.

With the handicap against it at the beginning, of having been roughly played in the city clubs, and the record of several girls having been hurt who played without the oversight of

a proper instructor, the game gradually grew in favor at Central High until even such old-fashioned folk as Mrs. Belding spoke approvingly of the exercise.

The girls themselves, even the "squabs" and "broilers," as Bobby Hargrew called the freshmen and sophomores, were more and more enthusiastic over basketball as the days passed. Although their champion team was being beaten or tied in the trophy inter-school series, they went to see each game, from week to week, and cheered the Central High team with unflagging loyalty.

The very next week Laura's team went to Lumberport, a small steamboat being chartered. It was filled with Central High girls and their friends, and they went over to the game, intending to have a collation aboard after the game and return down the lake by moonlight.

"Whether you girls beat the Lumberport girls, or not," chuckled Chet, "we're bound to have a fine time. But I *do* hope you'll lead your team to victory at least *once* this season, Laura. It looks as if you girls couldn't beat an addled egg!"

"Nor anybody else, Mr. Smartie!" snapped Jess Morse. "You don't know much about eggs, I guess."

"Nor you girls don't seem to know much about basketball," chuckled Chet.

"What's the fight about?" demanded Bobby, coming up to the group on the upper deck of the steamer.

"We ought to all pitch into him," said Jess, pointing to Chet. "He is maligning the team."

"All right. I'll help—if it's to be 'battle, murder, and sudden death,'" chuckled Bobby. "We ought to get our hands in, anyway, for to-morrow."

"What's to-morrow?" cried the girls.

"Didn't you hear what Gee Gee said to the English class to-day when the gong rang?"

"Go on, Bobby. What's the joke?" urged Dora Lockwood.

"Why, Gee Gee said, 'Now, young ladies, that we have finished this present subject, to-morrow we shall take the life of Carlyle. Come prepared.' If Jess really wants us to help her draw and quarter Chet, it might be good practice for what we're going to do to Mr. Carlyle."

"Poor Gee Gee," said Nellie, shaking her head. "She has her hands full just now. Some of the squabs are as bad as ever you were, Bobby, when you were a freshie."

"I like that!" exclaimed the irrepressible. "Me bad!"

"But what's happened to Miss Carrington?" asked Laura.

"She's got some mighty smart scholars in the freshman class," said Nellie. "The other day she asked them what two very famous men were boys together, and what do you suppose was the answer she got?"

"Give it up!" exclaimed Jess. "What was it?"

"One of those fresh squabs put up her hand and when Gee Gee nodded to her, she squeals: "'Oh, I know, Miss Carrington! The Siamese Twins!'"

There were enough old folk aboard the steamboat to keep the exuberance of the boys and girls within bounds. Short and Long had brought with him his famous piratical wig and whiskers, and with these in place and an old red sash-curtain draped about him, he looked more like a gnome than ever, he was so little. The girls dressed up a stateroom for him, into which he retired and told fortunes. And as Billy Long did not lack in wit he told some funny ones.

This was one of the few occasions when Alice Long, Billy's busy sister, had escaped from her manifold home duties to join in the "high jinks" of her schoolmates. When they were all laughing at Billy's antics and prophecies, Laura said to Alice:

"How do you ever manage to get along with those children, Alice? Tommy is as full of mischief as Billy, isn't he?"

"He's worse," sighed the big sister; yet she smiled, too. "Tommy's pretty cute, just the same. He had a birthday last week, and Dr. Agnew came through our street going to see Johnny Doyle.

"'Hullo, Doctor!' Tommy called to him. 'I gotter birfday.'

"'You have!' exclaimed the doctor, apparently very much astonished. 'How many birthdays does that make?'

"'I'm five, I am,' says Tommy.

"'Five years old! Well,' ruminated the doctor, stopping at the gate as though he contemplated coming in, 'what had I better do to a boy that's got a birthday?'

"And Tommy speaks right up promptly: 'You can't! I'm sitting on it!'"

They had a lot of fun on the boat; but when the basketball team of Central High got into their gymnasium suits in the Lumberport High School dressing-room, they came down to serious thoughts again.

"We really *must* beat these girls," said Laura, Mrs. Case being out of the room. "It's all right to talk about being 'good losers' and all that. But we don't want to be either good,

or bad, losers all the time. We've lost enough in the past. It's up to us to put Lumberport on the shelf!"

"Hear! hear!" cried Bobby. "That's the talk."

"We have usually been able to handle Lumberport at basketball," continued Laura. "Let's not make this an exception to a good rule."

Even Roberta felt the inspiration of coming success before the game. The team had been practicing faithfully and there was no real reason why every member of it should not make a good showing. Mrs. Case encouraged them as they went on to the court, and the Central High crowd lined out the "yell" to greet them. There was a big audience, for the Lumberport school had a good field and the parents of the girls engaged were enthusiastic over basketball.

The ball was tossed up and Laura shot it over to Lily. Lily was a pretty sure player when she was not excited. It was safe to trust her during the first of any game. She now passed it quickly according to her captain's signal, and to the right girl. The girls of Central High kept the ball in play for a couple of minutes, and entirely away from their opponents. Then Nellie got it for a good throw and—pop! the ball went into the basket.

"First goal—hurrah!" yelled the boys from Central High.

For despite the insistence of the League rules, and the advice and preachments of physical instructors, there was bound to be a spirit of rivalry in the games. How else would the interest be kept up? Playing for the sake of the game is all right; but the personal desire to win is, after all, what inspires any player to do his, or her, best.

There was no ugly playing, however; tense as was the interest, the opposing teams played fair and there was not an unpleasant word or look indulged in by a member of either. With Hester Grimes off the team from Central High there could be no complaint that they played too hard, or unfairly. The whistle in this first half sounded very seldom for fouls. And the game was played with a snap and vigor that was delightful.

Central High had somewhat the best of it from that very first goal. They won point after point. Half way through the first half Central High was three points in the lead. When there were five minutes still to go they made another clean goal, putting them up two more points.

But the Lumberport girls played well, too;

they did not "go to pieces" because the visitors' efforts were crowned with success. They fought steadily and made a goal during that last five minutes.

Then the girls of Central High got the ball and made a run with it down the field. Nellie seized it again and turned swiftly to throw. As she did so her ankle turned under her and she came down upon one knee with a little cry. The umpire was about to sound the whistle for time; but the doctor's daughter sprang up instantly and threw the ball straight into the basket. As she did so the timekeeper sounded her whistle. The half was over.

Two of the girls ran to help Nellie, who stood, as Bobby said, "on one leg like a stork!" She hobbled to the dressing-room between them.

"Oh, dear me! who'll we put in, Laura?" wailed Jess.

"You sha'n't put in anybody," cried Nellie, gritting her teeth to keep back a cry of pain as she set the injured foot to the floor again. "This will be all right in a moment."

"Looks like it!" cried Dorothy.

"You're knocked out, Miss," said Dora. "You know you are."

"I'm not!" replied Nellie.

Mrs. Case came hurriedly in. "You'll have

to rest that ankle, child," she said. "Captain Belding will have to put in a substitute."

"No, Mrs. Case. I'm going to play out the game," declared Nellie. "You must not forbid it. I've only twisted my ankle. It will be all right to-morrow. I'll show you!" she cried, and began stripping off her shoe and stocking.

CHAPTER XX

WINNING ALL ALONG THE LINE

"I CAN'T allow you to take risks, Nellie Agnew," cried the physical instructor. "What would the doctor say to me?"

"I'll tell you what Daddy Doctor would say," returned Nellie, grinning grimly to answer the shoot of pain that went through the injured ankle.

"And what is that, Miss?"

"He'd say: 'Grin and bear it! Play up!'" laughed Nellie, yet with a choke in her voice. "Bring me my bag, Bobby. I want my 'first-aid' kit."

"Nellie!" gasped Laura, amazed to see the gentle girl so firm. "We can find somebody else to put in instead of you——"

"Yes, but you're not going to," cried Nellie. "Give me that bandage, Bobby. There, Mrs. Case! you know how it ought to be used. Tight—tight, now! That will hold me up. And, really, half an hour's rest would cure the ache, anyway. Daddy Doctor admires pluck. He

admires Hester's bravery. I guess I wouldn't be his daughter if I didn't have just a bit of pluck myself."

"Hurrah for Nell!" squealed Bobby, waving a second bandage over her head, and the pin coming out, the strip of muslin soon became a tangle of ribbon-like cloth.

"Can she do it, Mrs. Case?" asked the doubtful Laura.

"She *shall* do it!" returned the instructor. "It won't hurt the ankle—bound up like that. Now, on with her stocking—and her shoe. Does it hurt, Nellie?"

"It's all right," declared the doctor's daughter.

"Does the shoe hurt it?"

"It's all right, I tell you," insisted Nellie, standing up.

Then the gong rang. The girls started for the door. Nellie was not the last one to reach her position. At first the audience was amazed to see her in place after she had hobbled off the field between two of her mates. Then, understanding, they cheered her — the boys deafeningly.

"You're all right, Nellie Agnew!" yelled Chet from where the boys of Central High were massed.

And how those girls of Central High played!

Perhaps it was the inspiration of Nellie's courage. Perhaps it was the inspiration of the cheering spectators. But never before had Laura and her team-mates played better basketball than in that second half with the Lumberport team.

Nor did the latter team "go to pieces." Every point was fought for.

Suddenly the ball reached Nellie's hands again. Her guard was in front of her. She dashed quickly back, as light of foot as she had been before her injury. Her guard was after her, but Nellie dodged to the right and then caged the ball from almost the center line!

"Good for you, Nell Agnew!" shouted the spectators.

Again the ball was at center and was tossed up.

"Shoot it to Nell, Laura!" advised some boy in the audience. "She'll know what to do with it!"

"Quick, there, center! don't be all night!" yelled another.

But the girls of Central High kept their heads about them. They watched their captain's signals. The Lumberport jumping center threw the ball the wrong way. Again Nellie jumped for it, and almost fell again; but she shot the ball true and fair to the basket.

By this time Nell was the heroine of the whole crowd. Her opposing guard was putting up a splendid game, but she was always just a breath too late. Laura saw that the doctor's daughter was keyed up for fine work, and she let her have the ball once more.

Nell dashed first to the left, then to the right; she completely lost her guard, and the guard from the other side ran in to intercept her. This is not altogether good basketball, and it gave Nell a splendid opening.

"Shoot it here, Nell!" cried Laura.

The ball passed through the hands of three Central High girls—a triple play often practiced on their own court—and then—plop! into the basket! Another goal to their score.

Time and again the Lumberport team came near to making a goal; but at the end the tally stood with the visitors eight points ahead of their opponents, after a fifteen-minute sessions that abounded in good plays and vigorous action.

The crowd from Central High certainly were in fine fettle when they marched down to the dock and went aboard their steamer. There was a fine spread in the cabin and Chet Belding made a speech. That was arranged for beforehand and most of Chet's speech dealt with "Why

Prettyman Sweet Eats So Much." Pretty was used to being joked, and didn't mind it much as long as Chet was talking and *he* could continue to graze at his pleasure upon the good things on the table.

"Only, I say!" he exclaimed, when Chet's speech was concluded, "I don't see why I am always selected to point a mowal and adorn a tale. Weally, I don't eat so much more than anybody else—according to my height."

"That's right, Purt!" cried Lance. "There's a lot of you—lengthwise!"

"And just think what a thin shell you've got," cackled Billy Long. "That's why it takes so much to fill you up, old boy."

"Don't carp and criticise, Billy-boy," said his sister, Alice. "I notice that a good deal goes onto your plate, too—and you haven't arrived at Purt's age yet."

"Don't talk to Billy about ages," giggled Bobby. "He can't remember anybody's age. I bet he couldn't tell how old Methuselah was."

"Give it up! Didn't know the gentleman. What team did *he* play on?" asked Billy, with his mouth full.

"Methuselah was 969 years old," declared Purt, seriously.

"Pshaw, Purt! was that it?" demanded Billy.

"I always thought that was his telephone number."

The moon was up in all her October glory when the young folk crowded upon the upper deck. There was a big gramophone on the boat and they had music, and singing, and the trip home was as enjoyable as it could be. The day, too, was a red letter one for the basketball team of Central High. From that time they began to win all along the line in the inter-school series.

They won from both East and West Highs during that month, and tied Keyport when that team came to the Hill to play them. The score of games played that fall showed Central High third on the list at the end of October, whereas they had been fifth. Keyport was in the lead and East High second; for in playing with other teams these two schools almost always won.

Chet Belding kept in touch with Hebe Pocock's condition at the hospital and occasionally sent the injured fellow some fruit and other delicacies. Once when he went to ask after Hebe the doctor told the boy to go up to the accident ward and see him.

"He's been asking after you. Wants to thank you for the stuff you've sent in. He's a pretty tough citizen, is Hebe," laughed the doctor. "But he has some gratitude in his make-up."

Chet went up and found that Hebe and the man Billson were pretty good friends, being in neighboring beds. In fact, Billson was now up and about the ward and would soon be allowed to leave the hospital; but it would be some time yet before Hebe could walk.

"It jest dishes me about gittin' that job at the young ladies' gymnasium, heh?" said Hebe. "Did they put that Jackway out?"

"Why, no," said Chet, puzzled a bit by the young man's manner and look. "Why should they?"

"He warn't no good," grunted Hebe. "You bet, if I'd had his job, nobody would have got in there and cut up all that stuff without my knowin' who did it."

"Perhaps he *does* know who did it," said Chet, slowly.

Pocock flashed him a sudden look of interest. "He ain't said so, has he?"

"Well—no."

"And they ain't give him the bounce?"

"My father says he doesn't think Jackway is to blame."

"Huh!" grumbled Hebe. "Maybe I'll git that job yet."

"How do you expect to do it?" demanded Chet.

"Never you mind. Henry Grimes has got

some influence, I reckon, an' he said I should have it."

"I guess they'll keep on Jackway. I wouldn't think of it, if I was you," said Chet, seriously.

"Say! that fellow's a dub!" growled Hebe, and became silent.

Chet talked with the squatter, Billson, as they walked down the long ward together.

"He's always goin' on about that job at the gym.," chuckled Billson, with a hitch of his shoulder toward Hebe's bed. "He was talkin' to Miss Grimes about it when she was in to see me the other day. That's a fine gal—Miss Grimes."

"I'm glad you find her so," returned Chet, but with considerable surprise.

"Nobody really knows who did that mean job in the girls' gymnasium, eh?"

"Well—some of us suspect pretty hard," said Chet, slowly.

Billson looked at him, screwing up his eyes tight. "Mebbe I could find out, Mr. Belding."

"How could you?" demanded Chet, quickly.

"That's telling. Perhaps I know something. I'd do a good deal to clear Miss Grimes of all this suspicion. Oh, I've heard the doctors and nurses talking about it."

"Say! do you think it would help clear her

of suspicion if you found out the truth?" demanded Chet, in wonder.

"Huh! why not?" returned Billson. "I guess you're one of these crazy folk that think she did it?"

"No. But I bet she knows who *did* do it," blurted out Chet.

"Good-day, young man!" snapped Billson. "I guess you ain't interested in what I know," and he turned on his heel and limped away up the ward.

But Chet went out, feeling very much puzzled, and proceeded to take Mother Wit into his confidence. If Hester was innocent of even the smallest part in that affair, the whole school—and people outside the school, too—were treating Hester very unfairly.

For by this time Hester Grimes scarcely had a speaking acquaintance with the other girls of Central High, and she was welcome only at Lily Pendleton's home.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT HESTER DID

Dr. Agnew was very much troubled over his little patient down in the tenements, and he told Nellie about it one evening after supper.

"I have had to insist that the child be taken to the hospital," said the good doctor. "That almost broke his mother's heart; but their rooms were not sufficiently airy. And then, the child is suffering from pernicious anæmia, and unless he mends he will die, anyway."

"That is an awful hard name to call little Johnny, Daddy Doctor," said Nellie.

"It is awfully hard for little Johnny, that's a fact," said the doctor, thoughtfully. "It is awfully hard for his mother, who, like the plucky widow she is, has struggled so hard to bring those children to where they are. Bill, of course, has helped her; but Bill isn't much smarter in some ways than silly Rufe. The widow's done it all; and she's just wrapped up in Johnny."

"How cruel for anything to happen to him!" sighed Nellie.

"It looks so. We can't see things in their true light very often, I suppose. It takes a Divine Eye to see straight," and the doctor wagged his head. "Here's this poor woman would give her heart's blood—that's the expression she uses—to save the little fellow. But her blood won't do. She is not in a healthy condition herself. And Johnny needs perfectly healthy, normal blood——"

"My goodness, Daddy Doctor!" exclaimed Nellie, with a shiver. "How you do talk!"

"Eh?"

"As though anybody's blood could help poor Johnny."

"Ah! but that's just it, Nellie. Somebody's blood *would* help poor little Johnny. A pint or so of somebody's healthy, red blood——"

"How horrid!" cried the girl, trying to jump off the chair; but her father's big hand held her.

"Wait. Don't be a ridiculous Miss Nancy!" he said, with a chuckle. "You are as much a surgeon's daughter as a doctor's daughter, I hope."

"I'm proud that you heal folk of diseases, Daddy Doctor," she said, laughing faintly. "But you talk now just like a butcher."

"No. The transfusion of blood is one of the most wonderful and blessed discoveries of recent years. Perhaps not a discovery; but the proper way to do it is a recent discovery. And that is what we want to try on little Johnny at the hospital."

"Oh, Daddy!" gasped Nellie, at last seeing that he was in earnest.

"Johnny's condition is such that he needs good, red corpuscles pumping through his veins, and without a proper amount or a proper quality of blood, he cannot live. The nourishment he can take is insufficient to make this blood. What he must have is now in the possession of some other person. We must find that person very quickly—or not at all."

"Oh, Daddy Doctor!" she whispered. "*I* could never do a thing like that!"

"I should say not," responded her father, quickly. "Don't make this a personal matter, Kitten. You need every ounce of blood you've got for yourself. You have been perilously near the anæmic state yourself in times past. This athletic business and the resultant hearty appetite you maintain has been the salvation of you, Nellie girl.

"Ah! we need a robust, healthy young per- of blood and not miss it. And I venture to

say it's healthy blood that gives her that color, despite the fact that you Miss Namby-pambies consider it 'coarse' and 'horrid' to have a red face."

"Hester!" exclaimed Nellie.

The doctor nodded, then fell into silence again.

It was the next afternoon that they proposed taking little Johnny Doyle to the hospital. The good doctor was at the widow's waiting for the ambulance when Hester Grimes came in. The widow was wailing as though her heart were broken; for with people of this degree of intelligence, to take a patient to the hospital is equal to signing his death warrant.

"Ochone! Ochone! I'll never see me little Johnny runnin' around the flure again," she said to Hester. "He's goin' jest like his poor feyther."

"What nonsense you're talking, Mrs. Doyle!" cried Hester, cheerfully. "He'll come back to you as chipper as a sparrow. Won't he, Dr. Agnew?"

"So I tell her—if God wills," added the physician in a lower tone.

Hester glanced at him sharply and then walked to the front room window where Dr. Agnew sat.

"What is it he needs, Doctor?" she asked, in a low voice. "His mother's always talking so wild I cannot make head nor tail of it. She says you want to put new blood in him."

"That is it exactly," said Dr. Agnew, his eyes twinkling. "A pint of blood such as your veins carry in such abundance might save Johnny's life."

"Do you mean that, Doctor?"

"Yes, Miss Hester."

"Then he can have it," returned the girl, quietly. "You can take it now, for all I care."

The doctor jumped up and walked back and forth across the room. Then he saw Hester stripping up her sleeve.

"No, no," he said. "It isn't as easy as all that. And I'm not sure I'd be doing right to let you do it——"

"I guess you're not *my* conscience, Dr. Agnew," said Hester, in her usual brusque way.

"No; but I have a conscience of my own," said the doctor, grimly. "This isn't a thing to be done in a minute, or in a corner, young lady. It includes one of the very nicest of surgical operations. It will keep you out of school for some time. It will keep you at the hospital. It will, indeed, keep you in bed longer than you care to stay, perhaps."

"Is it dangerous?"

"To you? No. Not in any appreciable degree. You are a full-blooded girl. You can spare much more than Johnny needs——"

"Then let it be done," said Hester, firmly.

"We'll have to see what your mother and father say."

"You leave that to me," said Hester. "I know how to manage them."

Dr. Agnew looked at her for a moment with his brow wrinkled and his lips pursed up. "I'm not sure whether, if you were my daughter, I should be most proud of you, or afraid for you," he said.

She only looked puzzled by his speech. "What do you want me to do?" she asked, finally.

"Come here to the light," the doctor said, rummaging in his kit for a tiny instrument. He held her thumb firmly. "It will only be a needle prick."

"Go ahead," said Hester.

He shot the needle into the ball of her thumb and drew out a drop or two of blood in the glass bulb of the syringe.

"We'll just find out what *this* tells about you in the laboratory," said the doctor. "I'm much mistaken if it doesn't tell a good story, Hester Grimes. Then I'll come and see your father and mother this evening."

"You needn't bother if you're going to be busy," observed Hester, coolly. "They will give their permission. When will you want me at the hospital?"

"You will sleep there tonight under the care of one of our very nicest nurses—Miss Parraday," said the doctor, smiling again. "And our little boy here—God willing—shall have a chance for life."

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT MR. BILLSON COULD TELL

THE champion basketball team of Central High was holding its own, and even gaining a point or two now and then in the trophy series; but it seemed impossible for the hard-working girls to change their standing in the schedule of the teams. They remained Number 3.

They could beat West High and Lumberport High School teams every time they played with them; but it was a hard struggle for Laura and her mates to break even with East High of Centerport, and the Keyport girls almost always downed them.

"It's a boiling shame!" cried Bobby Hargrew, one day at Laura's, when some of the team were talking matters over. "We're getting swiped——"

"Goodness me, Bobby!" gasped Laura. "*Don't* let poor mother hear you use such dreadful language. It positively hurts her to have Chet use slang; and you are worse than he is."

"One would think that you had never been under the benign influence of Miss Carrington," chuckled Jess Morse.

"Bah!" retorted Bobby. "I don't know but I feel a good deal like my little cousin Effie about education. You know, Effie is only six. The other day her mother had company and her mother and the other lady were talking about something that they didn't want 'little pitchers' to understand. So they spelled some of the words instead of speaking them out, and Effie listened with both eyes and mouth wide open. But she couldn't catch the meaning of the spelled words. Finally she got mad and went out to her papa on the porch and says she:

"'Daddy, there's altogether too much education in this house!'

"And I'm getting so saturated with Gee Gee's English and Dimple's Latin, and Miss Gould's French, that positively I *have* to let off steam by using slang," concluded Bobby.

"Just keep your slang for other places then, Bobby," said Laura. "Mother is likely to overhear you——"

"And Laura's pretty prim and particular herself," laughed Dora Lockwood.

Jess began to giggle. "She's getting literary, I understand," she said. "So Mammy Jinny

says. I heard her grumbling to herself only this morning when Jinny was 'ridding up' the living room here. She says:

"'Dese yere literary folk is suah a trouble. Leabin' books, an' papers, an' pen an' ink eroun' fo' odder folks to pick up.'"

"'Is Laura literary, Mammy?' I asked her.

"'Suah is,' says Mammy Jinny. 'Littahs t'ings all ober de house!"

When the laugh against her had subsided, Laura said:

"But what good is it to boil, Bobby, if we can't win games? To reach the top and win the trophy, we must win every game of the series from now on."

"And a fat chance we've got to do that!" exclaimed Bobby, scornfully.

"Four of them are as good as won," said Dora, confidently. "Those with the West High and Lumberport teams."

"Don't be too sure of the Lumberport team," advised Laura. "It improves all the time."

"We can beat it if Roberta keeps up her end," declared Jess.

"But how about Keyport and East High?"

"Keyport has outplayed us all but one game," complained Dorothy Lockwood. "East High has beaten us two games and one was a draw.

But we *have* beaten them and we ought to be able to do it again."

"That's when Hester was on the team," said Laura, quietly.

Bobby stood up and smote her two hands together loudly.

"If we only had Hester back!" she cried.

"Why, Bobby!" cried Jess.

"I don't care. It's so. I don't like Hester; but I hate to see Central High lose the trophy for the need of another good player."

Nellie Agnew was just coming in and she heard part of what Bobby said.

"Oh, girls!" she cried. "Do you know where Hester is?"

"She wasn't at school today," said Dora.

"Nor yesterday," added her twin.

"Nor the day before that," cried Laura. "What's happened to her?"

"She is in the hospital," said Nellie, solemnly.

"My goodness me! what for?" gasped Bobby Hargrew.

Nellie told them. Indeed, she expatiated on the affair to the full. Hester had displayed a quality of courage that appealed strongly to the doctor's daughter. It was no brave act inspired by impulse, and "of the minute." It took right down moral courage to do what Hester had done.

"The transfusion of blood was accomplished yesterday. The operation was entirely successful. Hester and Johnny are side by side in little narrow beds in the children's ward of the hospital. Daddy Doctor let me in to peek at them," said Nellie, her eyes full of tears.

"That girl's just splendid! Johnny is going to live and be strong again, the doctors say. Oh! I feel so *little* when I think of Hester. I'm so sorry I signed that round robin, or said anything against her being on the team. I—I wish we had her back."

"So—so do I" exclaimed Dora, and Dorothy echoed her twin's desire.

"I wouldn't mind if old Hess was playing with us," said Bobby, with a grin. "Huh! I guess I was the first one to say so."

And this last incident marked the further—and stronger—interest the boys and girls of Central High had centered in the City Hospital.

Laura and Chet had not forgotten Mr. Billson's odd remarks about the gymnasium mystery and Chet had gone again and again to the hospital to sound the man who had been so badly injured in the forest fire. But Billson was hard to approach. He considered Chet one of those who believed Hester Grimes guilty of instigating the raid on the gymnasium. Billson had acquired a fierce admiration for Hester, and

it made him angry with anybody who expressed a doubt of her entire innocence of the crime which Rumor laid at her door.

But suddenly public opinion veered clear around. The story of little Johnny Doyle's necessity and how Hester had volunteered to come to his aid spread about the Hill section of Centerport almost as quickly as had the story of the gymnasium mystery.

"What do you think?" Billson asked Chet Belding, when the boy visited him and Hebe Pocock again—but this was out of Hebe's hearing. "What do you think—that a girl like this would hire a foolish boy to do such dirty work? If Miss Grimes had wanted to bust up that gymnasium, you bet she'd have had the pluck to go and do it herself! That's my opinion."

"Well, Rufe was there," said Chet, quietly.

"Where?"

"In the gym. The first night the things were disturbed. Bill Jackway admits that. They've got time-clocks for him and he goes all over the building several times a night, now; and they have let him hire another man to help him on the field during the day. But he says that he let Rufe out at midnight because the boy was scared and wanted to go home. And the second time, Rufe could have slipped in when Bill

had the door ajar, and afterward got out of the window and walked backward to the field fence. Oh, he could have done it."

"But why mix Hester Grimes up with it?" growled Billson.

"Rufe would never have thought of the thing himself, I don't believe. And Hester threatened to 'fix' all the girls, and said she hated them, and the gym., and the whole thing."

"Guess she was mad," said the man.

"Quite likely. She sure wasn't *glad,*" returned the boy, drily.

"And I suppose you think," said Mr. Billson, scowling, "that she is doing all this for the Doyles to pay Rufus for his monkey-shines, eh?"

"No! I never said such a thing," cried the indignant Chet.

"Then what? If folks have really got anything against Miss Hester, why don't they come out square and say so? This hinting at things —going 'all 'round Robin Hood's barn'—gets my goat—it does so!"

"I guess the girls of Central High feel a whole lot differently toward Hester than they did," admitted Chet. "At least, they talk differently."

And it was a fact. While Chet and Billson

were talking the basketball team had gathered at the Belding house and had concocted another "round robin." But this one was couched in quite different language from the first that had been presented to their physical instructor. This time both Lily Pendleton and Roberta Fish signed the paper, which was an unequivocal request that Hester Grimes be invited to take her old position on the team.

Hester had not come back to school yet; the doctor would not allow it. But she was taking her lessons at home. Johnny Doyle was well on the way to recovery and all Hester needed was a little rest, the doctor said, to put her in as good condition as usual.

The round robin went to Mrs. Case and, after an interview with the principal, Mrs. Case went again to call on Hester at her home.

"Ain't she the greatest girl you ever heard of, Mis' Case?" demanded Mrs. Grimes, fluttering about as she ushered the teacher into Hester's presence. "Me and her father can't do a thing with her when Hess is set on doing anything she wants to do. And this at the hospital—well, if we say a thing about it she gets that mad!"

"How-do, Mrs. Case?" yawned Hester, who had been reading, curled up in the window-seat. "Do take that easy chair. Mother! I declare—

you have got a grease spot on that wrapper."

"Oh, excuse me!" exclaimed the simple Mrs. Grimes. "I'll go change it for a fresh one."

Thus her daughter got her out of the room before Mrs. Case began to talk. And, indeed, it was Hester herself who began the conversation in her usual abrupt way.

"I don't know how you feel towards me, Mrs. Case, but I know I was impudent to you when you were here before. But you said you could show me how to get back on the basket-ball team, and I guess I *do* want to get back—if it isn't too late?" she concluded, wistfully.

"That's what I've come to talk about," said Mrs. Case, promptly. "The girls want you back——"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Hester, in surprise.

"Oh, yes!" returned the teacher, smiling, and bringing out the paper the members of the team had signed. She put it into Hester's hand; the girl read it quickly and then turned her face away so that Mrs. Case should not see her eyes for a moment.

"They say they need me!" Hester said, in a choked tone.

"Yes," returned the teacher, simply.

"That they can't win the trophy without me," added Hester, devouring the writing again.

"Yes."

"And they don't say a word about that foolish business at the hospital. Folks talk too much about that," said Hester, recovering her usual manner. "If these girls really want me to help the team, I'll play."

"They want you, Hester, for just that purpose. If they have more kindly feelings toward you than they have had of late, that is between them and you. But as for your joining the team again——"

"Yes, Mrs. Case?"

"You must remember the rules and play the game in a sportsmanlike manner," declared the instructor firmly. "You understand me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Case," returned the girl, hanging her head.

"Then I shall expect you to appear for practice just as soon as Dr. Agnew allows you to take up that work," said the teacher, rising briskly. "And I shall be glad to have you back on the first team," she added, giving Hester's hand a hearty squeeze.

CHAPTER XXIII

CLIMBING UP

By the middle of the next week Hester was playing regularly in her old position on the basketball team. Roberta Fish had dropped back into the second team with all the grace of the sweet-tempered girl she was.

"I'm only too glad she's come back," said Roberta, referring to Hester Grimes. "It's much more important that Central High should win that beautiful silver trphoy than for *me* to have the honor of playing on the champion team."

"You're a good sort, Roberta," said Bobby Hargrew, admiringly. "Now, I'd be *mad* if they'd asked me to step down and let somebody take my place."

"No," said Laura. "You'd be loyal, too, Bobby."

"And that's the A. B. C. of athletics, child," said Nellie Agnew, remembering very clearly what the doctor had said to her weeks before on the subject.

"'A. B. C.,' indeed!" sniffed Bobby. "You make me feel like a primary kid again, I declare!"

Jess Morse began to laugh. "Some of these primary kids, as Bobby calls them, are pretty smart. Allison Mapes—you know her?—who teaches the first grade, was telling of a little Bohemian boy in her class. He is smart as a whip, but English is quite a paralyzing language to him. She asked him the other day:

"'Ivan, what is a calf?'

"And the boy answered: 'Missis, that's the child of a cow and the back of your leg!'"

When the laugh over this had subsided Laura spoke seriously. They were talking in one of the small offices of the school, having retired to discuss the forthcoming games.

"It isn't all plum cake and lemonade, girls, even to beat West High and Lumberport——"

"Oh, my!" croaked Bobby. "See what we did to West High last time without Hester."

"That was a fluke," declared the captain.

"Why, they're babies!" said Josephine Morse, confidently. "And Lumberport as well."

"Don't get the idea in your head that we are going to whip any team so easily. That's when we are going to lose," urged Laura. "Being

too sure is as bad as being careless in your play."

"Now she is hitting *me*," grumbled her chum.

"Well, Jess, if the cap fits, put it on."

"But do let us encourage ourselves, Mother Wit," cried one of the twins. "Goodness knows, we need it."

"That's right," said her sister. "We've had *such* bad luck!"

"Aw, she's a regular old croaker!" shouted Bobby, dancing up and down. "We are going to win every game from now on!"

"Hush!" exclaimed Laura. "We're making too much noise. Somebody will come and put us out."

"Nope. Nobody here but John, the janitor. Gee Gee's gone home, you bet. I wish those other girls would come and we could get down to business."

"You look out, Bobby. If you get black marks again maybe *you'll* be taken off the team for the rest of the term."

"Oh, oh!" cried the irrepressible. "Don't say such a thing."

"That would be too mean!" cried Dora.

"Indeed it would!" added her sister.

They were all making a deal of noise. As

Laura said, "one could scarcely hear one's self think." And noise was not allowed in the school building, whether in classes, or out. Suddenly, at the height of the revelry, there came a stern knock on the door. Behind the thick oak the startled girls heard a sharp voice exclaim:

"Young ladies!"

"Oh, gee!" gasped Bobby.

"Hush!" commanded Laura.

"Shucks! Somebody's fooling us," cried Bobby, springing to the door. "Who's there?" she shouted.

"It is me—Miss Carrington," said the muffled voice.

For a breath the other girls were stricken dumb when the name of the strict disciplinarian of the school was spoken. But it was Bobby who recovered her speech first, and she broke into a loud laugh.

"Go 'way!" she cried. "You can't fool us. It it was Gee Gee she would have said: 'It is I'!"

"Oh, my goodness! suppose it *should* be Miss Carrington?" gasped Nellie, in horror.

But the sounds outside the door ceased. Bobby, after a trembling moment, snapped open the lock and unlatched the door. The corridor was empty. But in a moment Hester Grimes

appeared from the stairway and approached the meeting place of the team.

"You said you wanted everybody here, Laura," she said. "But did you have Miss Carrington at your meeting?"

"Miss Carrington!" they shrieked in chorus.

"Yes. I just met her. And she had the funniest look on her face. What was the matter with her?" demanded Hester.

"Oh, my soul!" groaned Jess. "I can tell you what the matter is. Bobby just corrected Miss Carrington's English. What do you know about *that?*"

But the occasion was not one for laughter or joking now. That had surely been Miss Carrington at the door, and the reckless Bobby had called her "Gee Gee" to her face, and been saucy into the bargain!

"We're done for!" Dora Lockwood groaned. "Wait till assembly to-morrow. Bobby will be called out before the whole school."

"Oh! she'd never be mean enough for that!" almost wept Dorothy.

"But something dreadful will happen to Bobby," urged Nellie.

"She'll be forbidden after-hour athletics, as sure as shooting!" declared Jess Morse.

Bobby, for once, was stricken dumb. She

saw in an instant all the horrid possibilities of her reckless speech. Barred from the team for the rest of the term would be the lightest punishment she could hope for.

"And Gee Gee is always lying in wait for a chance to spoil our athletics," wailed Lily Pendleton, who for once felt the sorrows of her fellows.

Hester wanted to know what it all meant, and they told her.

"She certainly *did* look funny when I met her on the stairs," admitted the butcher's daughter. "And you told her she couldn't be herself because she said, 'It is me?' My! that must have been a shock to her. One of her pupils correcting Miss Carrington's use of the English language!"

"It isn't any laughing matter!" flared up Bobby.

"And I don't see that crying over it will help any," returned Hester, grimly.

The team as a whole, however, was worried a good deal by Bobby's "bad break." To be obliged to break in a new girl at Bobby's place would be almost ruinous now. Just having gotten the team into shape once more, it seemed an awful thing to contemplate.

But assembly passed the next morning with-

out Mr. Sharp saying a word about Bobby. The session dragged on till closing time without Gee Gee's speaking to Bobby Hargrew. That very day East High was to come to play the girls of Central High on their court.

The uncertainty, however, made Bobby less sure in classes, and she came near to being held to make up her Latin. But she slipped through somehow and ran away from the school building as hard as she could run, for fear that Gee Gee would send for her at the last moment.

"Something's happened to her. She's had a change of heart. I'm afraid she isn't well," gasped Bobby, once safely in the dressing room of the gym. "She is *never* going to overlook that awful break of mine—is she?"

"You'd better walk a chalk line from now to the end of the term," advised Jess. "If she ever *does* get you on any other matter she will double your punishment. I believe she is ashamed to call you up for what you said to her yesterday, because you caught her using language unbecoming a purist."

"Be thankful, Bobby—and be good," advised Laura. "You have certainly escaped 'by the skin of your teeth,' as the prophet has it. No, that is not slang; it is Scripture. And do, *do* be good for the rest of this half."

"Oh, I'll be a lamb—a little, woolly lamb," groaned Bobby. "You see if I'm not!"

The girls of Central High played a splendid game of basketball that afternoon. They beat the East High team fairly and squarely, and their winning this game put them up a notch in the series. They took East High's place as Number 2. There was still the Lumberport and Keyport teams to whip before Central High could win the trophy.

CHAPTER XXIV

HESTER WINS

THE final games of the trophy series between the girls of the High Schools of Centerport, Lumberport, and Keyport were played on the grounds of Central High. It was verging on winter. Thanksgiving was at hand, and the first basketball series must be out of the way before the boys' big football games on Thanksgiving eve.

Although school athletics was much in the minds of the girls, those who participated in the games had to stand well in their classes to retain their positions on the teams. Books first, athletics afterward. That was the iron-bound rule of the Girls' Branch Athletic League.

But most of the girls on the team of Central High were bright scholars. Miss Grace G. Carrington was never "easy" on the athletic girls. That wouldn't be her way. She usually seemed glad to put obstacles in the way of those who she knew were so deeply interested in athletics.

But aside from Bobby Hargrew, that last fortnight she had no chance to demerit any of the basketball team. And—to the wonderment of the girls themselves—she never said a word to Bobby regarding what had happened when she, Miss Carrington, rapped on the office door.

Having whipped East High so decisively, Captain Laura and her mates went at the Lumberport team with greater confidence. Lumberport was not the weakest team in the league; but Central High had managed to beat them in every previous game, and in this last one the home team played such snappy basketball that the visitors never came near them after the first toss-up.

It was a great game and the enthusiasm of the spectators increased with every play. How the boys cheered! There was a big crowd of spectators from Lumberport and they "rooted" for their home team. Despite the excitement, however, there was not a moment's rough play.

Mrs. Case had watched Hester narrowly during these final games. There had been moments when the big girl was crossed by circumstances, or by her opponents, when—in the past—she might have flared up and said, or done, something unpleasant. But Hester seemed to have gained some control of her temper, and the

hard places in the games were passed over successfully.

It was a fact that Hester had very little in common with the rest of her team-mates, save Lily. She did not put herself forward, and as none of them had been her close friends before she was put off the team, she still kept her distance now that she was back in harness again.

At home Hester's mother was determined to make a heroine of her. Many of the ladies of the Hill, who seldom before this had called on easy-going, slip-shod Mrs. Grimes, came to see her now and praised Hester's courage and her kindness to Johnny Doyle and his widowed mother. Mrs. Grimes was, naturally, pleased at all this praise.

"I've a mind to give a party, so I have!" she said to Hester, one day. "Your father could easy pay for as nice a party as was ever given on the Hill. He needn't be stingy. And we could get to be friends with all these nice folks——"

"Oh, Mother!" sighed Hester. "Don't be foolish. These people don't really care a thing for us. They'd only laugh. Their houses are not even furnished like ours——"

"I should say not!" cried Mrs. Grimes. "We have some of the most expensive furni-

choor you could buy at Stresch & Potter's——"

"Yes. At a department store. Nice people do not furnish their homes in that way. The varnish smells too new on our chairs and tables. We are too new. We never should have come to live on the Hill when father made money."

"How ye talk!" exclaimed the astonished Mrs. Grimes. "Where would ye have us live—at the Four Corners still?"

"Perhaps we wouldn't be so much like fish out of water there," grumbled Hester.

"I'm no fish, I'd have ye understand!" exclaimed Mrs. Grimes. "And Mrs. Belding axed me to join a club—the New Century 'tis called. 'Tis all women and our husbands haven't a livin' thing to say in it. I'm goin' to join."

"The New Century!" exclaimed Hester, indeed surprised.

"Yes. I'd be glad to be in something that Henry couldn't poke his finger into and boss," sighed the much harassed lady.

"But it's never the New Century?" cried Hester.

"Why not?"

"That's the most select club on the Hill. Lily's mother belongs, and Mrs. Agnew, and all those folk."

"And why not *me?*" demanded her mother. "We've got as much money——"

"Hush! Stop talking about money if you want to be popular in the New Century Club," said her daughter, who had learned a thing or two herself of late. "That is what is the matter with us—we're proud of our money."

"And why not? When Henry began with a shoestring."

"Well, don't be telling of it!" cried Hester. "These other people got their money so long ago that they've forgotten how they got it. We want to forget, too."

But Hester was learning lessons fast. It had amazed her to see how people—and nice people, too—thought that what she had done for Johnny Doyle was of serious importance; while her lavish expenditure of money among her mates had heretofore won her few friends.

The fact that she had saved a man from the burning woods and carried the warning of the forest fire, had made her friends, too. When she had jumped into the sewer-basin after Johnny, Dr. Agnew seemed for the first time pleased with her.

It was unselfishness that counted!

Hester Grimes had never thought of it before. She had never thought out logically why Laura Belding was so popular, why Nellie Agnew was liked so well, and what made the other girls cluster about harum-scarum Bobby Hargrew.

They were all unselfish girls, thoughtful in their several ways for the comfort of others.

Hester was learning what really paid in life—especially in the life of school and athletics. A good temper, a tongue without a barb to it, and thoughtfulness for the comfort of others. Those attributes won out among the girls of Central High—as they are bound to win out in every walk in life.

And Hester Grimes had begun to conduct herself accordingly.

The final game of the series for the cup was slated for a certain Friday afternoon. Colonel Richard Swayne—Laura Belding's very good friend, and a liberal supporter of girls' athletics—had invited the contesting basketball teams from all five High Schools to partake of a collation in the big upper hall of Central High's new gymnasium, after the final game. *That* was to be played between the Keyport and Central High teams.

Whichever of the two teams won would stand highest in the schedule of the league, and to such winning team would be presented the trophy by the president of the Board of Education.

There would be such a crowd to see the game that tickets had to be issued, and those tickets went mostly to the girls who had competed in

the basketball series, for distribution among their parents and friends. There was not so much cheering by the spectators at this game, for the boys were cut out of it. There wasn't room for the regular "rooters."

Many parents, however, who had not been attentive to the game before, were in the seats provided now, to criticise the sport of which they had heard so much. And everybody admitted that the two best teams of the schools were now struggling for the trophy.

From the first toss-up the girls played with a snap and vigor that amazed and delighted even their instructors. Trained as they had been all the fall, there were few fouls to record, and very little retarding of the game. The signals were passed silently and the girls indulged in little talking. Unnecessary talking and laughter mars basketball.

It was a pleasure to watch the lithe, vigorous young girls. They were untrammeled by any foolish fashions, or demands of dress. Their bodily movements were as free as Nature intended them to be. They jumped, and ran, and threw, with a confidence that none but the well trained athlete possesses.

The first half included a series of fierce rushes upon the Keyport side for baskets; but

Central High held them down. Hester played brilliantly. Not once did she lose her temper, nor foul her opponent. She blocked the attempts of the Keyport players to make goals, but the referee did not catch her overguarding or otherwise playing foul basketball.

She really won the onlookers with her splendid form in playing. They began cheering her particularly. Where Roberta Fish had been weak in the mass plays, Hester was strong. The Keyport captain, remembering that weak place in the former Central High line-up, forced the play into Hester's territory.

"Oh, you Hester!" yelled Bobby, beside herself at last, with enthusiasm. "You're a bear! Shoot it, Hessie! Let it come!"

But each time that the ball was shot for the basket, something intervened. Once it went straight for the basket, rolled around the rim, and dropped—to the floor without entering the receptacle!

The Central High rooters met this failure with a groan. But it was not Hester's fault. She had done her best, and her shooting was as clean as it could be.

The timekeeper's whistle called the play at the end of the half without either side having made a point.

It had been a rasping game. Many times Hester Grimes had been tempted to say something or do something that would be counted as "rough play"; but she had restrained herself, and when she walked to the dressing room she found Mrs. Case walking beside her with a hand upon her shoulder.

"Good girl!" exclaimed the physical instructor of Central High. "Keep it up, my dear, and you'll be the best player we have on the roll."

"But I didn't get a chance to do a thing!" grumbled Hester, shaking her head.

"That is why I am praising you," said Mrs. Case, drily. "For what you *didn't* do. Keep it up. Restrain yourself as well for the rest of the game. Your chance may come for a brilliant play; but if it doesn't, keep a grip on yourself just the same."

Hester was secretly strengthened by this praise. She went out into the field at the call of the gong for the second half with the determination to deserve Mrs. Case's good word, whether the team won or lost. And almost at first chance came Hester's way and she was permitted to display a brilliant bit of play. It brought a goal for Central High—the first scored in the game.

But the girls could not stop to cheer her. Laura nodded and smiled at her, however, as the ball was brought back from the basket to be tossed up. For some reason Hester began to feel a warm glow about her heart. Her captain's commendation had never meant much to her before.

Up went the ball and Laura and the other jumping center did their best to get it. The ball went from girl to girl, first in the hands of one team, then in the other. The Keyport team almost made a goal; but they were foiled by good guarding on Central High's part.

Up and down the field went the ball and the excitement grew moment by moment. Two to nothing in favor of the home team! That was a situation bound to create excitement both in the field and on the benches.

Suddenly the captain of the visiting team got the ball. She passed it swiftly to her back center. Signaling one after the other of her teammates, the Keyport captain sent the ball from hand to hand until—to the startled amazement of her opponents, the ball was in hand for a clear throw. In another moment it was in the basket and the score was tied again!

Four minutes more to play!

When the referee threw the ball up again

every one of the eighteen girls playing was on the *qui vive*. The subordinate players watched their captains for signals. Central High got the ball. They rushed it down the field. But the guarding of the Keyport team was too much for them. They could not reach the basket.

Again and again was the ball passed back and forth. Once more the Keyport captain shot it back for a clear throw. But Hester managed to halt it. There were but a few moments of play left. It is not good basketball to oppose other than one's immediate opponent; but for once Hester went out of her field to stop the ball.

A side swipe, and the ball was hurtled directly into Laura's hands. She turned and threw it swiftly, making the signal for the famous massed play which was the strongest point in the game as played by Central High.

Down the field the ball shot, from one to the other. Hester's quick break in the Keyport plan had rattled the latter team for a moment. And before the visitors recovered, the ball was hurtling through the air straight for the basket.

The whistle blew. But the ball sped on. It struck the edge of the basket; but the next breath it slid in and—*the game was won!*

Central High had outstripped its strongest

opponent. The game won, so was the series, and the beautiful cup would remain in the possession of Central High.

"And all because of you, Hessie!" shouted Bobby, when they got back to the dressing room. "You're a bully good sport! Isn't she, girls?"

"She won the game," declared Laura, coming forward to shake Hester's hand.

They all had something nice to say to her. Hester couldn't reply. She stood for a moment or two in the middle of the room, listening to them; then she turned away and sought her own locker, for there were tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED

The boys, as has been said, were shut out from seeing the last basketball game of the series. Chet Belding was at the hospital that afternoon, having taken up some fruit to Hebe Pocock and Billson. The latter would soon go out and would return to his burned-over clearing in the woods.

"Guess that fire helped me as much as it hurt me. I'll have to build a new shanty; but Doc Leffert was in here and said he'd rode over my piece, and that my heaps of rubbish had burned clean and all I'd have to do to clear my acres for corn would be to tam-harrow it."

"Hebe isn't getting along as fast as you do, Mr. Billson," said Chet, in a low voice, for the Four Corners fellow was having a hard time to even move about on crutches.

"Dunno as he deserves any better than he's got," said Billson, grumpily.

"What you so cross about?" laughed Chet.

"Surely you're not sore over the way folks are treating Hester Grimes *now?* She comes pretty near being the heroine of the Hill section."

"Ya-as. They praise her because she done what she did for little Johnny Doyle. But many of 'em still think she set that foolish boy onto raiding the girls' gymnasium."

"I don't know about that," confessed Chet, slowly. "Although we may believe that Rufe had something to do with it, perhaps he did it, after all, because he's not quite right in his head."

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed Billson. "All because he was crying to be let out of the gym. the night of the first raid?"

"Well, Jackway admits he was there," repeated Chet.

"And Jackway is a good deal of a fool, too," snarled Billson. "Say! there's Rufe and his mother in the corridor now, going to see Johnny in the children's ward. You bring Rufe into this ward for a minute. I want to show you something."

Much puzzled, Chet Belding did as he was bid.

"Come here, Rufie," said Billson, beckoning to the gangling youth. "I want to show you somebody. Come here."

Billson swung back a section of the screen

that hid Hebron Pocock's bed. The big fellow was lying there with his eyes closed, but he opened them quickly when Rufe appeared, and scowled.

"Watcher want here, gooney?" he demanded.

Rufus sprang back and looked about for escape, his weak face working pitifully. But Chet and Billson barred the way of escape. Rufe began to snivvle.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Chet.

"Are you afraid of this man?" asked Billson.

Rufe nodded, and tried to crowd farther away from the bed.

"What you doing to that kid?" demanded Hebe, sitting up. "What's the matter? Why! that's the softy I saw——"

"He's a bad man. He said he'd kill me if I told!" gasped Rufus.

"Where was that?" asked Billson, with his hand on the boy's arm. "Tell us all about it. He sha'n't touch you, Rufie."

"Aw! I wouldn't have really hurt the gooney," growled Hebe.

"He was in the place where Uncle Bill watches. I hate that old gyminasium! I wish it would burn down, so I do."

"And when you were in there that night this fellow was there?" asked Billson, shaking the boy a little by the arm.

"Yes. And he broke things. And Uncle was worried afterward. But I never told," Rufe urged, looking fearfully at Hebe. "I said I wouldn't——"

"Aw, drop it! You've told on me now, haven't you?" demanded the fellow from the Four Corners. "Well, it don't much matter, I reckon. I wanted to queer that Jackway so he'd lose his job. Henry Grimes told me that if he was discharged he'd speak a good word for me and I'd get it. That's what I was after."

"Yah!" said Billson, with scorn. "You certainly are one mean scoundrel, Pocock. And lettin' folks think mebbe Miss Hester was mixed up in it. Nice feller, you are!"

"Well! I don't see where it's any of *your* funeral," growled Pocock. "You make me tired!"

But the result of Rufe's confession and Pocock's admission changed the latter's place of abode rather suddenly. Both Chet and Billson decided that the truth about the gymnasium raids should be made known at once, and the Board of Education took the matter up promptly. Pocock found himself in the infirmary of the county prison, with the chance of serving three

months at hard labor when the prison doctors pronounced him able to work.

His attempt to work Jackway out of the job of watchman, so that he could be appointed to the position, had acted like a boomerang. Hebron Pocock was most thoroughly punished.

And Chet Belding hurried to spread the tidings of the discovery among the girls of Central High, too. He got hold of Laura before the spread the basketball teams were to enjoy, and she told Principal Sharp, who was present. When he made his usual speech of welcome, he tacked onto it a paragraph regarding the gymnasium mystery.

"Which is," said Mr. Sharp, "a mystery no longer. As I said when first the matter was brought to my attention, no pupil of Central High, either male or female, could be guilty of such an abominable crime. Such a malicious piece of mischief had to be originated in a perverted mind; and we have no such minds at Central High."

"But it has furnished excitement enough for us all to last for the rest of the winter," said Laura, later, to her immediate friends. "I'm *so* glad for Hester! But we've all been stirred up enough about it, I guess. No more excitement this term, girls!"

Whether Laura's wish came true, or not, the

reader will be able to find out for herself in the perusal of the next volume of this series, entitled "The Girls of Central High on the Stage; Or, The Play That Took the Prize."

None of them looked forward to a really "tame" winter, however. There would be other basketball games, and plenty of out-of-door sports as well. As Bobby Hargrew said:

"It's all right to say that school takes up all our time; but it's the fun we get out of school that makes Latin, and French, and mathematics, and—and—Gee Gee bearable! My! suppose we didn't have athletics at all?"

"That would certainly be a state of existence perfectly unbearable—for you, Bobby," Nellie Agnew said, gravely. "You'd burst, wouldn't you?"

"Into flinders!" agreed Bobby. "Athletics is the 'scape-valve for me—and I guess it is for some of the rest of you. Now, tell the truth!"

And her friends had to admit the truth of her declaration.

THE END

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